KOIMONOGATARI

LOVE TALE

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
DANIEL JOSEPH

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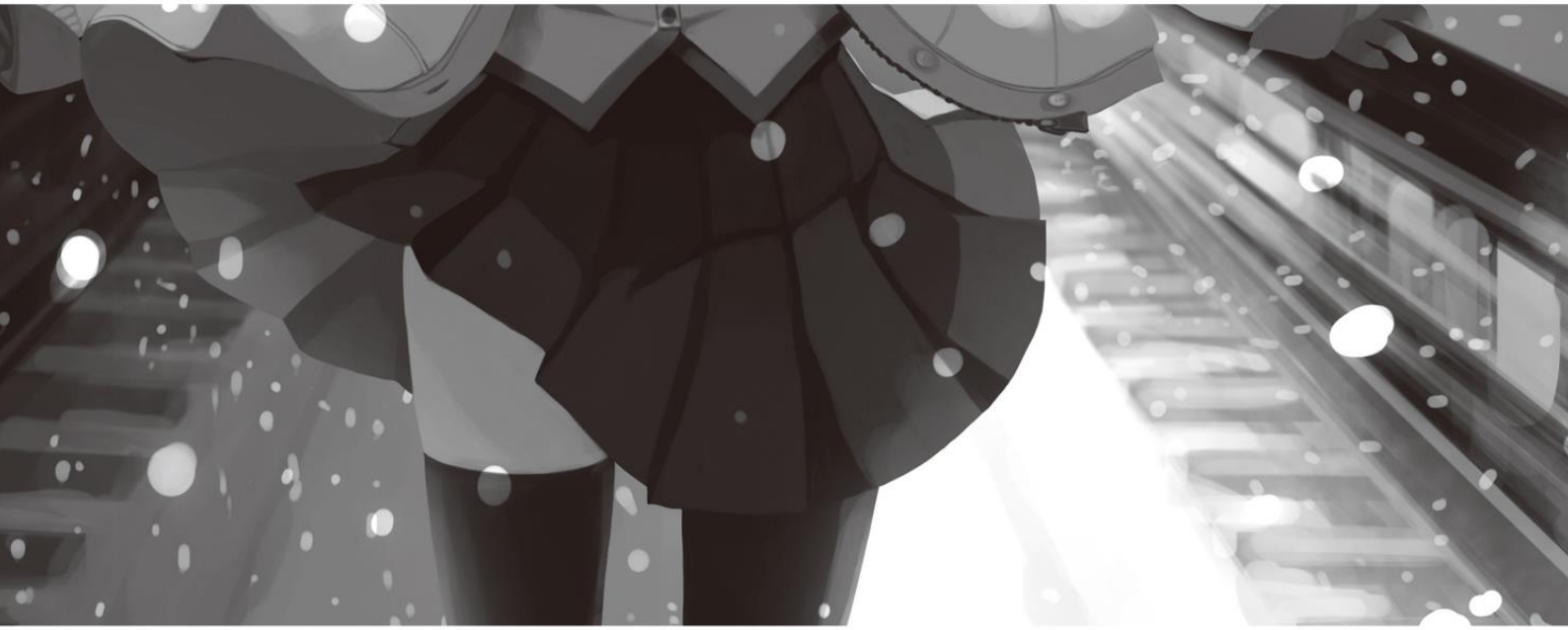

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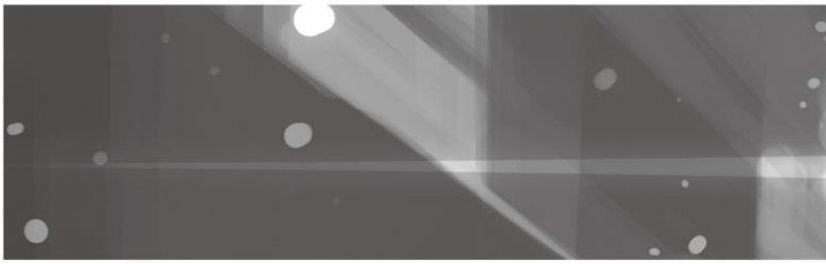

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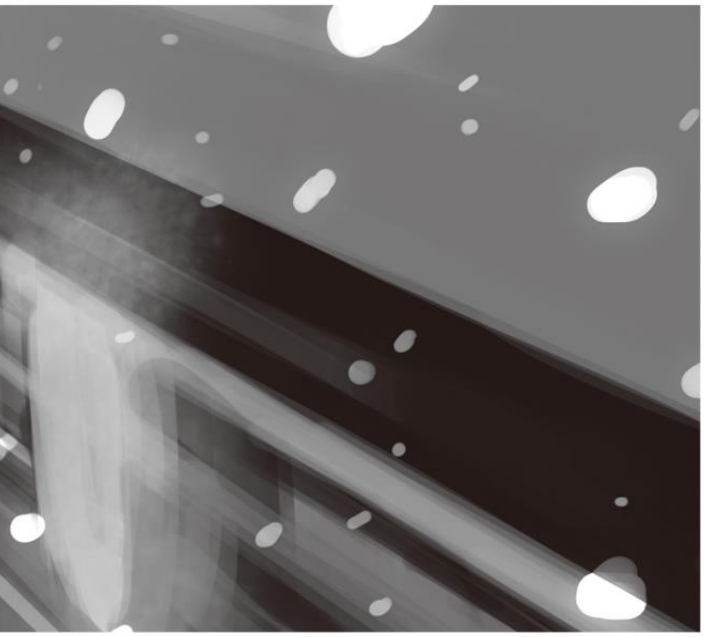

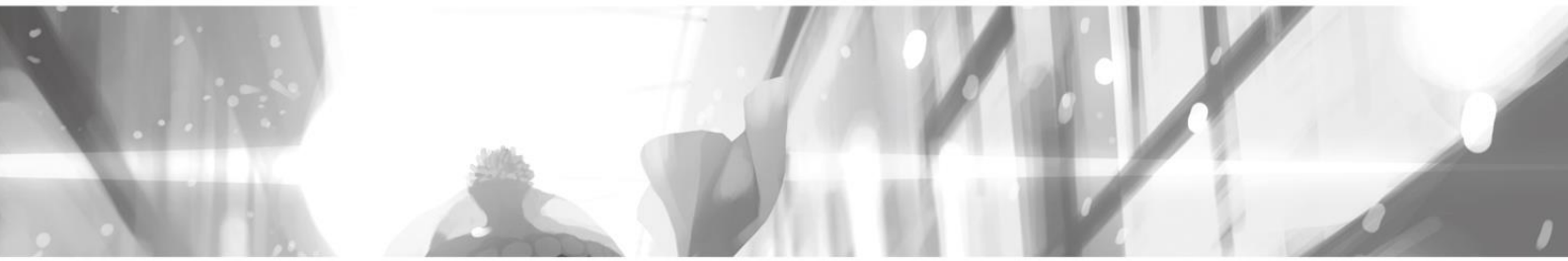

CHAPTER ROMANCE

HITAGI END

CHAPTER ROMANCE
HITAGI END

HITAGI SENJOGAHARA

Ladies and gentlemen, dear readers, all of you who picked up this book expecting Hitagi Senjogahara to be the narrator have been duped. The lesson you should take home from this is that every sentence ever written down in a book is bogus.

This is by no means limited to novels.

Every word ever set down on paper is a lie.

Even if the cover of a book touts it as nonfiction or labels it documentary reportage, it's all lies.

What the hell else would it be?

It's just a sales pitch, don't buy it.

In fact, trusting the written word is what's actually strange, if you ask me–the "me" in question ostensibly being Deishu Kaiki, swindler, though even that might not be true.

Then again, I'm not completely insensible to the very human impulse to believe the unbelievable–after all, my livelihood depends on taking advantage of that very impulse.

People want to know the truth.

Or, they want to believe that what they already know is the truth–what's actually true is secondary. Recently, the rather overwhelming "truth" vouchsafed by Einstein's theory of relativity, that "matter with mass cannot exceed the speed of light," has come crashing down around our ears.

The "fact" was announced that the neutrino, a particle likely unknown to the majority of law-abiding citizens, moves just a few nanoseconds faster than the speed of light–and that shocking, terrifying "fact" sent people into a panic.

But, if you ask me, it's a mystery why those people put so much faith in Einstein's theory in the first place. I find it endlessly fascinating–naturally, it's not like I, inept and poorly educated as I

am, understand a single word of the theory of relativity, but I expect that the majority of law-abiding citizens, too, are as ignorant of it as they are of neutrinos.

So why were they so invested in the “truth” of this principle that “matter with mass cannot exceed the speed of light”? Probably because it was easier than doubting its veracity.

Doubting.

Is stressful.

Living with even the trivial suspicion that “there may in fact be matter that moves faster than the speed of light” eventually takes its toll–and human beings have a low tolerance for stress.

The point is that it’s less about not doubting than about “not wanting to doubt”–people want to believe that they can trust in their surroundings, the world they live in, and want to feel secure.

They want security.

So they reject the hobgoblins of doubt, and believe.

Moronically, and mystifyingly, most people would rather have the wool pulled over their eyes than face their doubts.

Our society could not be more comfortable to live in, for someone like me. Or maybe it’s not a question of society or the system, maybe it’s just about people.

A question of human nature.

It’s human nature to believe in people, to believe in theories, and also to believe in apparitions–in aberrations.

However much society or the world may change, people never will.

People are people.

Humans are human.

They won't change, and what's more, they can't.

Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, for those of you who readily believed that this tale would begin with a soliloquy from Senjogahara, I encourage you to do some serious soul-searching.

And I do so shamelessly.

If you don't want to spend your life making a mess of things, be skeptical. You've got to spend money to make money? Be skeptical of that too.

If you want to know the truth, first you've got to know falsehood.

So what if your heart and mind grew sick from it.

Naturally, you should be thoroughly skeptical of the existence of faster-than-light neutrinos, and you really should be skeptical about whether I'm even the swindler Deishu Kaiki.

I might even be Hitagi Senjogahara pretending to be Deishu Kaiki–after all, there's precedent, isn't there? Eleven hundred years ago, a man started off his poetic journal with the words, "I intend to see whether a woman can produce one of those diaries men are said to write."

And that might be a lie too, for all we know.

So if there are any patient readers out there who didn't slam this book shut in a huff the second they realized they'd been tricked, much respect. In place of the usual introduction, let me give you some advice.

Some solemn advice.

Prepare yourself.

Get ready.

Unlike some fainthearted and morose nonsense user, or devious, cross-dressing middle schooler (even if they are liars and swindlers, same as me), I have no intention of upholding even a minimal level of fair play in narrating this tale.

I swear to narrate unfairly in the spirit of a lowdown, dirty Liar-man.

I will lie to my heart's content, I will make things up wherever it's convenient, and I will pointlessly hide the truth and falsify events.

If lying is like breathing for those guys, it's like cutaneous respiration for me.

I advise you to pay careful attention to what is true and what is false as you read on, in other words to doubt everything, to jump at shadows–then again, I hasten to add that at that point you may have already fallen into my trap.

Now then.

Interweaving truth and fiction, and throwing in a dash of half-truth just for fun, I will now relate to you the love story of Hitagi Senjogahara and Koyomi Araragi.

I've never been interested in high-school puppy love, even when I was in high school, but those kids did so much to hinder my business dealings that I feel it's only fair to have a little fun at their expense.

Urban legends.

The word on the street.

Secondhand gossip.

And slanderous talk–all of these fall within my area of expertise.

They're my bread and butter. The proof that I am me.

I can't guarantee honesty, but I can guarantee quality–and I hope that when we reach the conclusion of their tale, every one of you

reading at home thinks, “Serves them right.” From the bottom of my heart.

If I have a heart, that is.

If there is an “I,” that is.

So let the games begin.

As we begin what will be the final tale–though obviously that may not be true either.

On that day I had gone to visit a certain famous shrine in Kyoto, Kyoto Prefecture, Japan–if it got around that I had been there, though, the shrine’s reputation might suffer, so I won’t reveal its name. That day shall henceforth be celebrated as the anniversary of my embranglement in Araragi and Senjogahara’s puppy love, but the fact that I, desultory fellow that I am, remember the precise date is by no means an indication that those two are particularly memorable to me.

The reason I remember is simply that that day is by far the easiest to remember out of all 365 in the year–in other words, it was January first.

New Year’s Day.

I was at the shrine to ring in the new year, like all the other faithful.

That’s a lie. I’m not a religious person (in fact, it’s doubtful whether I’m a person at all), so I don’t believe there are gods or buddhas in this world, and I have no desire to be around people who throw away their money–that thing I prize more than anything, more than life itself–as though it were worthless garbage.

If that’s what it means to be human, I’ll pass.

I'm the kind of guy who, once upon a time, bankrupted an entire religious organization with a little con that I had concocted–a cold and heartless person in a cold and godless world.

Such a person wouldn't make the traditional New Year's shrine visit, and even if he would, I doubt that whatever gods might be there would accept his offering. They wouldn't sign for the goods; the alms would leap right back out of the offertory box. Not that I have any interest in testing that theory, even as a lark.

So why would I willingly be on the grounds of a shrine at New Year's, surrounded by teeming hordes of worshippers? *Because I work part time as a priest, obviously*–nope, not a chance. I'm aware that there's a shortage of part-time shrine maidens, but I really don't think priest is a part-time kind of job–though I wouldn't have thought shrine maiden was, either.

If you ask me, it's one hell of a con.

I'm not trying to criticize–more like I want a piece of the action. After all, most of the worshippers are just there to enjoy the atmosphere.

Anyone who would readily believe that some college co-ed is a shrine maiden simply because she's wearing a shrine maiden's outfit is just asking to get taken for a ride.

As I see it, believing = begging to be bamboozled.

And that is exactly why I was at that shrine on New Year's Day, doing nothing but people-watching–I had come in order to observe them as they visited the shrine half-ironically, throwing away their money, that thing more precious than life itself, as though it were nothing but trash–in order to research the ecology of such people.

The law-abiding citizenry.

The law-abiding citizenry, afraid to doubt.

Every New Year's I visit a shrine to remind myself that *I'll never be like them, if I end up like them it's all over.* And it doesn't have to be New Year's; even in the middle of summer, if I'm feeling down or if I'm depressed because a business venture has failed, I visit some shrine somewhere and reset myself.

New Year's is when the shrines are most crowded, of course, but there are always at least one or two worshippers throwing away money like discarded candy wrappers.

There are always a few fools around.

Always some people around.

And watching those people, I remind myself *I'll never be like them, if I end up like them it's all over.*

A warning.

A self-admonition.

Maybe that sounds like a convincing explanation, but maybe I was really there for a different reason entirely. Maybe I was actually there to pray for good health for the coming year, or for a likely bride to come along.

There's no end to the "maybes" that we could pursue about me. Maybe.

All of that said, why I was at the shrine has no bearing on any of the tale to come, so it makes no difference why I was there. The important thing is that, at that moment, I was at a shrine in Kyoto.

Naturally Kyoto is not where I'm from. I had not popped down to my local shrine. That is to say, there is no place that I think of as "where I'm from." You may say, *Oh, but your family register must be somewhere,* but I sold it off when I was a teenager.

Well, "when I was a teenager" is a lie, and "sold off" is only half true, but the fact is that I am currently a man without a family

register–the man called Deishu Kaiki died in a traffic accident some years ago. And I received some percentage of the insurance money paid out at the time, as was my legitimate right.

Does that sound fishy, even for a fabrication?

Nevertheless, I swear by all that is holy that I am at present a vagabond with no fixed abode–not the sort of thing to say at a shrine, perhaps, but oh well.

In that regard, I'm living a life not so different from that of my best buddy Mèmè Oshino–if there is a difference, it's only that he prefers to sleep in abandoned buildings, while I prefer to sleep in gorgeous hotels.

I'm not making a value judgment; it's just a question of preference, a matter of taste, so to speak–just as I would rather die than sleep rough, old Oshino despises gorgeous hotels, and cell phones, and filthy lucre.

Then again, where his peripatetic lifestyle has an element of professional fieldwork to it, mine is more of a life-on-the-run kind of a thing, so if we're going to make a value judgment after all, then I guess it turns out that he's the one who should be valued, and I'm the one who should be judged.

In any case, I was not in Kyoto at the time because I'm a Kyotoite–unlike Kagenui, I don't make fluent use of a boundlessly suspect Kyoto dialect, nor I am well-versed in the city's *onmyodo* of auspicious directions and locales.

The only reason I always spend New Year's in Kyoto is that it's where one spends New Year's–does that sound miserably fishy?

Listen, in reality it could have been anywhere–a famous shrine in Tokyo, a famous shrine in Fukuoka, it doesn't matter.

If you want to think, *He just said Kyoto for the sake of convenience,* that doesn't bother me at all–if you want to believe that I actually passed an elegant New Year's in Hawaii, that's no problem at all, and hell, you can believe that I spent it in some warzone for all I care. The one thing that is true beyond a shadow of a doubt is that I absolutely was not in that idyllic, peaceful little town from which I am barred entry, but you don't even have to believe that if you don't want to.

Basically, I don't give a shit.

It just doesn't matter.

What sort of place I was in, how I felt, or what I was doing has no bearing at all on where this tale began.

I was an outsider wherever it began, and I'll still be an outsider when we cross the finish line. I'll never be anything but an outsider, to the bitter end.

The important thing is when.

When.

It was New Year's–that's the only important thing. The reason that New Year's, out of all the days of the year, leaves the strongest impression and remains most clearly in your memory is, of course, that it's a special day, and this is true even for someone like me–even for an old codger like me, whose memories of summer vacation and winter vacation and spring break have all faded. I expect it's even truer for high school students, what with receiving money and greeting cards and all. For them it must be a real red-letter day.

And on that red-letter day, I received a phone call.

A phone call from a high school student.

"Hello, Kaiki? It's me, Hitagi Senjogahara."

She wielded her name at me like a sword.

Hearing only her voice, you would absolutely never think she was still in high school.

“There’s a person I want you to deceive.”

There’s a saying that “only the idler works on holidays,” but while I don’t think of myself as an idler, and in fact fancy myself to be quite industrious, I have no objection to working during New Year’s. It’s my personal belief that the swindler always has to put his nose to the grindstone.

Because swindling is a purely, indefensibly criminal act in any constitutional state, the cost performance index is typically poor–hounded, hated, it pretty much sucks. On occasion I’m gripped by the thought that I might do better in an honest line of work, but if I were doing honest work I honestly wouldn’t work as hard as I do.

How can anyone work hard when they’re guaranteed job security within some big organization? That said, it’s not like I was so hard up for work that I would blithely accept a job from someone with a private number calling on New Year’s Day, like a car sideswiping me out of nowhere.

It’s not like I was about to starve to death.

In fact, at the time I had five or six other cons going simultaneously–five or six might be inflating my numbers a little bit, but only a little. I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a lie, exactly. And who doesn’t fudge the numbers a little bit when it comes to work?

So I shot back, “Come again?”

Come again?

In other words, I was pretending not to have caught what the person on the other end of the line had asked of me. No, rewind, I

was pretending not to have heard her confirm my identity, before she even got to the rest of it.

“Don’t play dumb. This is Kaiki, right?”

In response to a high schooler’s hounding, I replied, “My name is Suzuki. Suzuki, written with the characters for ‘bell’ and ‘tree.’ As in, doesn’t ring a ‘bell’ and you’re barking up the wrong ‘tree.’ I’m terribly sorry, but I think you may have the wrong number. Senjogahara? I’m afraid I don’t recognize the name.”

I stubbornly continued to play dumb, but she was having none of it, and just said, “Sure, Suzuki then, whatever.” She just fucking played along. “And I won’t be Senjogahara, you can call me Senshogahara.”

Senshogahara.

Who the hell is that? Or rather, where the hell is that?

Up north in Tohoku, if I recall correctly–I went there once when I was working a tourism scam. Nice place. Or no, maybe I didn’t go there. Maybe I didn’t work a scam.

Either way, her rejoinder worked its magic on me.

I let down my guard, and now I had to listen to what she had to say.

Well, if I really hated working on holidays, then I could turn off my cell phone, smash it, destroy the SIM card, and toss them both away to be trampled by the bustling crowds–or I could just not answer the damn thing. But I did, so maybe I intended to take the job all along.

Regardless of who the client might have been.

I had answered the phone based on some kind of premonition–or that’s what I told myself, anyway, acting for all the world like I had been waiting for a call from her all along.

“Suzuki,” she said.

“She” being this unknown Senshogahara woman–though age-wise, she seemed like more of a girl than a woman. Not that I knew anything about her, of course.

“There’s a person I want you to deceive. I’d prefer to talk about it face to face, so where can we do that? Where are you right now?”

“Okinawa,” I replied immediately.

I’m not sure why.

“In a coffee shop in Naha, having a continental breakfast.”

Earlier I said something about it not mattering where in the world you thought I was, but let’s say that was a lie–the truth is that I was in Okinawa.

Okinawa, the pride of Japan’s tourist industry.

Not a chance, sorry. Okinawa was the one place in the world I was definitely not.

It was a spur-of-the-moment lie.

Maybe I haven’t mentioned this, but I lie with astonishing frequency.

An occupational hazard, or maybe I should call it an occupational vice. I lie in response to questions at least fifty percent of the time.

That’d be an excellent average for a batter, but maybe a little too hot for a swindler.

But let’s say that this time it wasn’t because of that hazard or vice, let’s say it was a strategic lie.

A little show I put on for this Senshogahara person.

If I said “Okinawa,” even a scary woman on the other end of the line might give up, what with a new sweetheart and a new leaf she might have turned over.

Surprisingly, what breaks a person’s spirit most of the time is simply the sense that something is going to be a hassle.

Break, come on, break!

This time, however, my calculations were sadly incorrect, and Senjogahara, I mean Senshogahara, unhesitatingly replied, “Got it. Okinawa. I’ll leave right away. I’ve already got my shoes on. Call you when I land.”

She was apparently prepared to go to Okinawa as if it were just a local park down the street. I wondered if maybe she was in the vicinity of Naha anyway on a family outing to celebrate the holidays, but knowing the present state of her family’s finances, I didn’t think they had the means–and yet.

And yet she didn’t hesitate for a moment in agreeing to go to Okinawa, which paradoxically demonstrated to me how desperate her situation was.

Not that I had any idea who or where she was, of course.

The daughter of that household I had fleeced way back when certainly had no money, but sure, maybe this Senshogahara was some nouveau riche kid with a pied-à-terre in Okinawa.

“Make sure you keep your phone on. If I can’t get through, even if it’s because you don’t have service, I’ll murder you.”

With those hostile parting words, she hung up.

I can but express my gratitude that her call miraculously managed to reach my cell phone amidst the teeming hordes, tens-of-thousands strong, who were crowded into the grounds of that shrine for the New Year’s celebration.

This world is built on miracles.

Inconsequential miracles, for the most part.

Strictly speaking, I'm pretty sure Senshogahara said something else before she hung up, before her parting threat.

Something.

If I heard her correctly, that mumbled something might have been, "Thanks, I owe you one."

I owe you one.

I.

Owe you one.

For that young lady to utter those words to me, the person she probably hated most in the world… It was hard to believe. Well, leaving aside what kind of a young lady that young lady might be, her back was clearly against the wall.

Anyway.

Because of my own stupid lie, I ended up having to rush off to Okinawa.

That being said, my travel costs amounted to no more than bus fare to the airport (not that bus fare should be taken lightly, mind you)–because I am the proud possessor of an All Nippon Airways Premium Pass.

After an initial payment of three million yen, the Premium Pass, or more precisely, the Premium Pass 300, can be used up to three hundred times within a period of one year, from the beginning of October to the end of September, and allows the bearer to book any seat on any domestic flight at any time they choose. Or to put it in much simpler and less highfalutin terms, it's something like a coupon book on steroids.

That means that every ticket works out to ten thousand yen, even a flight from Hokkaido to Okinawa, which makes the card a really excellent value–then again, there are no direct flights from Hokkaido to Okinawa, so you'd have to get a connecting flight and therefore use the card twice.

And a year is only 365 days to begin with, so there's also the question of how to actually fly three hundred times within that period. Is a lifestyle that involves flying almost every day really feasible? Even a vagabond like me probably couldn't make full use of the card.

So calculating that each flight costs ten thousand yen doesn't really make sense–but using the card only a hundred times would still be an excellent return on my investment, so I'm very pleased with my purchase.

I like buying things, and I particularly enjoy buying luxurious, stylish, yet streamlined things–so I feel great about the purchase of this Premium Pass, which checks all those boxes.

Incidentally, these cards are also limited to three hundred per year. When I think to myself that there are probably two hundred and ninety-nine other people out there with inclinations similar to my own, I can't deny that I get a little thrill, but in all likelihood the majority of those two hundred and ninety-nine people are elite businessmen who would thoroughly despise a swindler like me, so I shouldn't give it too much thought. It all begins to seem questionable.

At any rate, my status doesn't allow me to own a credit card, and I wasn't carrying much cash (I really splurged at the end of the year, and most ATMs are closed on New Year's Day), but thanks to the pass a trip to Okinawa was no big deal, provided there was an available seat.

Fortunately there were plenty.

Departing Kansai International Airport Arriving Naha Airport–may or may not have been the itinerary, but that doesn't matter. At any rate, Departing Nearest Airport Arriving Naha Airport.

While it may have been the holidays, there didn't seem to be many people making spur-of-the-moment trips to Okinawa on New Year's Day–the question was whether or not I could get to Okinawa before Senjogahara, I mean Senshogahara, but in that regard there was nothing I could do but consign my fate to the heavens.

The heavens through which I was flying…

She had said "make sure you keep your phone on," but I had to turn it off once I was on the plane–even I abide by that rule.

Though they seem to have revised it recently.

In the past, it was a hard and fast rule that once you were inside the plane, you had to turn off not just cell phones but any devices that emit electronic waves (Walkmen, laptops, video games). Now, though, you don't have to turn them off until the airplane doors are closed (in other words it's okay to make phone calls until then), and once the plane is on the ground and the doors are open, which is to say while you're still on the plane but haven't yet disembarked, you can turn them back on.

Did they change the rule because it wouldn't actually be a problem for the instruments to go haywire on a plane that isn't moving? I don't thoroughly understand the mechanisms in question, but that would seem to make sense.

I have to say it seems unlikely that the electronic waves from a cell phone could even have an effect on the instruments of an airplane (enough of an effect to be a problem anyway), but that's neither here nor there.

What I’m trying to say is that these rules change relatively often without our even knowing it.

The Road Traffic Act was recently revised so that it isn’t technically a violation to ride your bicycle on the sidewalk anymore, but I doubt even bicycle-loving Koyomi Araragi knows that.

He pedals along in blissful ignorance.

Well, in an age when even the theory of relativity has been refuted, mere human laws are bound to change–not that it’s any fun to go along with it, of course.

But while we’re on the subject of arbitrary rules, despite having to switch off all sorts of electronic devices, using portable cassette or CD players in the cabin during takeoff and landing is apparently fine.

I guess they don’t count as electronic devices.

It’s not like I still use a Walkman, so I don’t particularly care, but it’s part of my job to find those “exceptions to the rule.”

So bear this in mind.

Never forget to think.

To doubt.

Abiding by rules is not the same as believing in them.

Think, think, think.

In a sense, you could say that the cabin of an airplane is the most suitable place for doing some thinking–once your seat belt is securely fastened, there’s not much left to do but think.

And naturally the thing I needed to be thinking about just then was not the utility of electronic devices inside an aircraft, but, naturally, the job I was about to undertake.

Well, I wasn’t necessarily going to undertake it.

I might refuse.

All I had agreed to do thus far was listen to what she had to say–and even that decision could be easily overturned. Decide, then reverse the decision. From Naha Airport, maybe I would just fly off to some other airport.

But, that said, I prize my life–not above all else, it runs a close second to money, but that doesn't mean I don't also hold it dear–so it was unlikely that I would break my promise in the face of Senjogahara's, no, Senshogahara's threats, given that if I did so she really was liable to "murder" me… But, well, the point I'm trying to make is that I harbor doubt even when it comes to my own decisions.

Anyway, this job of Senshogahara's.

This unknown job for this unknown woman.

Would it actually be profitable?

Whether her name was Senjogahara or Senshogahara, the one thing I could be certain of was that she was a high school senior–and it was hard to believe that someone like that would have much money to throw around.

Times change, maybe now there are high school seniors running their own companies with billions in liquid assets, but someone like that wouldn't hire a shady guy like me–much less hire him for a con.

A deception.

"There's a person I want you to deceive."

What did that mean?

Maybe it didn't mean anything. Maybe she just said that because she knew it would pique my interest–not just meaningless, but a deception in itself. It wasn't out of the question that a squad of

police or a street gang she had deployed would be waiting for me upon my arrival into Okinawa.

Hmmm.

Now that I thought about it, it seemed pretty likely, even.

But I'm a pro, being trapped like a rat doesn't scare me one bit. That wouldn't even constitute a sticky situation for me. At most it'd make for some decent exercise.

We all need a shot in the arm sometimes.

And if she turned out to have become that predictable, then I could finally stop looking over my shoulder–and live out the rest of my life free from the paranoid fear that she might appear one day and stab me to death.

So the possibility that it did mean something–that the words "there's a person I want you to deceive" did mean something, that she indeed had a formal job to offer me–would be much more of a pain in the ass.

That might really be a sticky situation.

Something to be afraid of.

At the very least it wasn't going to be as free and easy as "some decent exercise."

I've trained myself so that my emotions don't register on my face, but that's not the same as being able to completely control them.

I feel fear just like everyone else.

I get scared, I experience trepidation.

Once you stop feeling those things, you're done for–I've also heard people say that once you're on the grift it's all over anyway, but I like to pretend I haven't.

Just as I can be afraid of things, though, I can also be interested in them. So, stimulated by curiosity, I decided to proceed with my ponderings.

To push them forward.

Undaunted by fear, I would press on.

Who could she, that unknown young lady, possibly want to deceive? How could someone who had been the victim of a con, who'd had such a terrible time of it, want to inflict the same fate on someone else?

Fascinating.

I couldn't help but be curious.

I've never personally been swindled so I can't say for sure, but from what I've heard it seems much more usual for victims to remain victims than to become perpetrators themselves.

I bet it's related to the way someone who's been swindled once falls prey to one further swindle after another.

That girl–I had no idea who she was, but in any case, that girl–wanted me to be her partner in crime. Which was pretty much unthinkable–on that score, I felt nothing but apprehension.

To put it another way, I had a bad feeling about it.

A bad feeling.

An awful feeling.

No good could come of it.

Some people might say no good could ever come of any con…but this bad feeling went well beyond that.

On that particular flight I was assigned a premium seat so all the alcohol was free, but I decided to hold off. I didn't know what

Senjogahara, no, Senshogahara had in store for me, and had to keep my wits about me.

We landed at Naha Airport, and my phone rang the second the doors of the plane were open, as if she'd been watching like a hawk, checking her watch, and watching for me like a watchdog.

There weren't many people who even knew my phone number–and there was no reason for Senshogahara to have it, even if she was Senjogahara.

That is, she herself had destroyed the number of mine that she'd known–well, strictly speaking, it was the cell phone she destroyed, and I was able to transfer the number to a new phone, but deciding it was too dangerous to continue using a number she knew, I'd canceled my contract immediately thereafter.

…I guess the young lady could get her hands on my contact info if she tried. Whoever she was, in fact, whoever you are, you can obtain a fair amount of info with a modicum of effort.

Not that you can know everything, like a senpai of mine.

But you can find out a fair amount.

If you have the motivation–which most people lack.

People are lazy.

And being lazy is worse than being stupid.

Forget being "bored to death"–it isn't boredom that kills people, it's apathy.

"Kaiki? I'm here."

"Who's Kaiki? My name is Suzuki, Miss Senshogahara."

"Drop the act. Please, stop behaving like a kid. Where should I meet you?" asked Senshogahara, uncouth in the face of my feigned ignorance–like she was telling me, *playtime's over.*

“Miss Senshogahara,” I continued my act, my childish behavior–a lie, in a way.

In other words, out of habit–a bad habit.

“Actually, I’ve come to the airport to greet you,” I said.

“Oh really.”

“Since my client has taken the trouble of traveling all the way here, it was the least I could do… Let’s meet in the lobby.”

“Well, well. Your consideration is most welcome. Quite the user-friendly swindler, aren’t you. What a laugh.”

Even without a videophone, Senshogahara’s utterly humorless expression came across loud and clear.

Not a glimmer of this new leaf she had supposedly turned over.

The same woman she’d been two years before.

What the hell was Koyomi Araragi up to–not that I had the faintest idea who Koyomi Araragi might be, but seriously, what was that moron doing?

What was he thinking, letting such a dangerous woman out of his sight?

Then again, maybe something had happened to make the reformed Senjogahara have yet another change of heart–could that something be what she wanted to see me about?

If so. If so…

“I thought for sure you’d flown into Okinawa from somewhere else in Japan yourself. That you’d just arrived at the airport too.”

This made it sound even more like she’d been watching me–a “not that you can know everything” type of intel…

She wasn't in a position to access ANA's customer data in such a short time.

So it was probably a shot in the dark, or a cheap shot. With that in mind, I responded calmly, "I have no idea what you're talking about. I just arrived at the airport on the Naha monorail, if that's what you mean."

It's infinitely easier for me to lie than to tell the truth–most of the time my mouth does the lying for me.

Almost like automatic writing. As phenomena go, a natural phenomenon.

Knowing Oshino, who's a pro when it comes to seeing through people, and Gaen-senpai like I do, being looked at, being watched, doesn't ruffle me one bit.

Go ahead, get an eyeful.

I'll just turn everything you observe about me into a lie–because it's my pet theory that the so-called "truth" is subject to ready substitution by falsehood.

Pet theory? When the hell did I start keeping a pet?

"Sure, whatever. 'Lobby' is a little vague. Can we meet in a coffee shop? There must be at least one in the airport."

"But of course," I replied, not at all patronizingly, with the utmost courtesy. It would be difficult to keep up the tone once I was face to face with Senshogahara, though. "Please take a seat in whichever establishment you prefer, have yourself a cup of coffee, and wait there for me. I'll take it upon myself to come to you."

"…Should I text you the name of the place I pick?"

"No, no. I wouldn't want my client to go to such trouble. I'll make the rounds of the airport's coffee shops and make myself known to

you, so please, Miss Senshogahara, I would be delighted if you had some coffee or a nice, refined cup of tea while you waited for me."

"But we've never met before," she objected. Whether she was playing along or was just fed up with me, I don't know, but she seemed to have taken up the act again. "Should we decide on some kind of sign?"

"A fine idea. Please hold your iPhone in your right hand, then."

"…Just about everyone has an iPhone these days. That won't help at all."

"Oh, theirs are just early models."

A joke, a lame joke. At least it wasn't sinister.

If I didn't get off the plane soon they were going to start cleaning around me, so this was no time to be making such jokes, but that's exactly when I make them.

Oshino used to take me to task for it back when we were in school.

Yes, that Oshino, the last person in the world who ought to be lecturing me. But if it was bad enough that *he* needed to say something, I have no choice but to admit it, galling as it is.

I thought I had become an adult, but if I was operating on the same conversational level as a high schooler, I had yet to shed my boyishness.

"My cell phone isn't an iPhone in the first place," Miss Senshogahara corrected me. "I don't have a computer at home so I can't even use one."

"My goodness, is that so?"

"I'm wearing glasses, that'll be the sign."

And with that she hung up.

Wouldn’t even more people be wearing glasses than using iPhones? Wait, did she even wear glasses?

Had her eyesight deteriorated since the last time I saw her thanks to all the exam prep?

Though from what I understand, your eyesight is largely genetically determined anyway. However much you dress it up as “burning the candle at both ends,” it isn’t going to get much worse from studying–and in fact, she must not have been cramming for any entrance exams.

I got through them on shrewdness alone, but even such shrewdness wouldn’t impress Senjogahara. We’re talking about a woman who once argued, or joked, that studying lowers your tension and your grades along with it. Goofing off leads to higher marks or something. Even if she was kidding, and while what I know about her grades is two years out of date, if she continued on the trajectory she was on back then, she could get into basically any college she chose without any preparation at all.

In which case, maybe the glasses thing was some kind of joke as well. She, too, was the type who becomes more prone to telling silly jokes the more dire and unsuited to humor the situation.

Well, this may sound overly self-conscious, but she got that way thanks to me… My personality was slightly too strong a poison for a high school first-year, an adolescent child.

Anyhow, I put my cell phone in my pocket and got off the plane–I had no carry-on luggage. It’s my policy never to carry luggage of any kind.

My person is the sum total of my worldly goods.

I don’t like to carry anything I can’t put in my pocket.

Sometimes the nature of my work calls for more, of course, but in such cases I ultimately, and immediately, dispose of whatever materials I acquired for the job.

Oshino once chided me that my lifestyle was a little extreme, or something to that effect, but again, look who's talking.

Seriously.

My mood tinged with nostalgia as I cast my mind back to college, I disembarked, going from head in the clouds to feet on the ground–though the nostalgia part is a total lie, of course.

I wandered around the airport–and it didn't take long to locate the client. It wasn't my first time in Okinawa and I had a pretty good sense of the coffee shops at Naha Airport, but the simplicity of the task stemmed more from the fact that my client Senshogahara's "glasses" turned out to be an extraordinarily effective "sign" after all.

I can't imagine a better one.

I knew it was her right away, even from outside the shop.

An immediate positive I.D.–because the "glasses" in question were in fact novelty nose glasses.

The kind with a moustache attached.

What could be more conspicuous than a high school girl wearing her school uniform and Groucho glasses at a café–forget conspicuous, it was outlandish. Even I was caught off guard.

That's not the kind of thing they sell at airport shops, so she must have had them ready to go even before we brought up signs and so on… Yeah, no, I mean, dammit, what a fool!

But at the same time, touché…

I was overcome with a sense of defeat.

I felt like a whipped dog.

The rubric for judging this kind of contest is extremely delicate, and subtle, so it's a little hard to explain, but to put it simply, the moment you think you've lost, you've lost.

Senjogahara or Senshogahara, now that I had found her, I didn't feel like going into the café.

If I went in and sat down across from her feeling like I did, I would definitely have lost the initiative. The whole conversation would proceed at her pace–which is not how I preferred to do things.

Or more like hated to.

I eased away from the café and headed to the airport souvenir shop to purchase those reliable staples of Okinawan retail: sunglasses and a Hawaiian shirt.

It's a mystery to me why they sell Hawaiian shirts in Okinawa…but those iconic articles were supposedly based on Japanese kimono, so if you think of it as reverse importation, it seems less strange.

In a bathroom stall I removed my jacket and shirt and put on the Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses, then checked my look in the mirror. Some cheerful fellow was reflected there, like, *who the hell is this guy?* Perfect with a ukulele–but it's never productive to pursue perfection. If you don't leave a little wiggle room, a little play, you won't be able to act when it really counts, like with the steering wheel of a car.

After ensuring that I hadn't left anything in the pockets, I dropped my jacket, shirt, and necktie into a garbage can just outside the bathroom and headed once more to the café where my client waited.

Wearing a supremely composed expression to complement my new outfit, I strode straight up to the table and sat down across from her.

“Bwah!” the woman with the nose glasses spat out the orange juice she was drinking.

The fact that she was drinking orange juice and not coffee or tea as I had suggested might have been a token of defiance on her part.

Whatever the beverage, with that spit-take I had her in the palm of my hand.

Keheh.

I had won.

My brains had.

Inwardly I pumped my fist–though of course my expression didn’t waver for a second.

I calmly settled into my seat like everything was totally normal and said to the waitress who came over with a towel, “Hot coffee. And another glass of orange juice for the young lady.”

A man in a Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses must be a completely unremarkable sight in an Okinawa airport because the waitress just took my order and left. As she did so, however, she glanced somewhat suspiciously at the high school girl holding her sides in seeming pain across from me.

“Wh-Where’s,” having finally recovered enough to speak, the girl in the Groucho glasses said between shallow breaths, “that funeral suit you always wear… Does Okinawa make even a person like you, um, cheerful?”

“It’s not a funeral suit. Not all black suits are for funerals.”

Just as I suspected, my polite tone was gone the moment we were face to face.

Part of me wanted to keep playacting a little longer, but whenever I catch myself in that sort of mood, I consciously bring it to a close.

I'm a contrarian and a congenital liar.

I keep at it, fooling myself too.

"And I wear the occasional Hawaiian shirt, why not?"

"Yeah right, you're still wearing your usual trousers…and leather shoes. Kinda ruins the effect. Cracks me up…"

Hmph. She was definitely laughing at me, not with me.

It pissed me off. Was I being small?

"And you, did you cut off that flowing mane of yours? Whatta surprise, you look good."

Small as I am, I chose not to comment on the Groucho glasses. In other words I gave it the cold shoulder and instead steered the conversation to her hair, which she had cut audaciously short.

It hadn't actually taken me by surprise, though, since over the summer Koyomi Araragi had shown me a picture of her with short hair. That being said, it was currently a little longer than it had been in the photo–maybe?

"…"

She used her napkin to wipe up the orange juice she had spewed all over the table, then turned to face me–and I finally found myself confronted by her trademark iron mask, which the party item seemed only to diminish.

I guess she missed her chance to remove it.

"Been a long time, Senshogahara."

"Yes, Suzuki."

Our six-month reunion–I'm pretty sure that's how long it had been.

I could be wrong. I couldn't care less.

It was a reunion with a woman I never thought I'd see again, who I thought would kill me on sight if I ever did–with the daughter of a family I had swindled in the past.

Hitagi Senjogahara.

"Never thought I'd hear from you like this. So what's up? Something happen?"

"There's a person I want you to deceive."

My client Hitagi Senjogahara, whom I can finally stop calling Senshogahara, a high school senior at, what was it, Naoetsu High, repeated what she'd said to me over the phone. Like she could only make her pitch as if she were reading it straight off a cheat sheet.

From her attitude, it seemed possible I had misheard her after all when I thought she said, "I owe you one." Maybe it had been wishful thinking.

But again, I couldn't care less.

It's an open question whether there's anything I *could* care less about.

I wouldn't be surprised if those mumbled words had been a trick to lure me out–in reality, though, now that I had been lured to Okinawa and was listening to her pitch, there was no end to how much less I couldn't care about the call's particulars. It was ancient history.

History was never my favorite subject.

It was all the same to me whether the woman sitting across the table was someone I had swindled a long time ago, a passing tourist,

or the daughter of my greatest benefactor. I couldn't care less, across the board.

"There's a person I want you to deceive," she said again–not so much to me, by this third time, but as if she were trying to persuade herself. As far as I was concerned, she was getting tedious. "I wonder if you can pull it off."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. There's not a soul in the world I can't deceive–"

I was intentionally talking big because I figured Senjogahara hated that kind of braggadocio more than anything. When I don't have a handle on the conversation, my first move is to say and do whatever I think will displease my interlocutor.

What's the point, you ask?

No particular point.

I just feel more comfortable being hated than liked–if anything, lessee, maybe it's because being liked equals being taken lightly, while being hated at least means you're being taken seriously.

Or whatever.

"–But until I hear some concrete details, I can't say one way or the other."

"I only couched it as a job offer so you could save face, since even if you're not my better you're at least my elder. This is something you were going to have to do all along."

"What the hell?" I shrugged my shoulders at Senjogahara's statement. I had no idea what she was talking about. Talk about pointless. "Is this about atonement? You want me to make up for putting you through the wringer once upon a time? What can I say, you've really grown, Senjogahara, and I don't just mean your boobs."

I threw in that dash of sexual harassment to make myself that much more hateful, of course, but maybe it didn't have the desired effect on the girlfriend of a pedophile–and anyway, she had penetrated my "make them hate me first" defense a couple of years ago.

Penetrated it like a sword, or maybe with the sharp tip of a writing implement.

So maybe it was pointless, after all. However adept the sleight of hand, it was like performing a magic trick after the secret has been revealed–even if it's easier for the victim of a con to be victimized again, this young lady, who'd been so harshly deceived, falling for my tricks a second time was unthinkable.

So I didn't think it.

"I'm not asking you to make it up to me," Senjogahara continued seamlessly as though she'd taken no damage.

I didn't care for her knowing attitude. Didn't care for it at all.

"Araragi already healed the wounds I suffered at your hands."

"Oho. That's splendid. Aren't you two cozy."

"I'm asking you to make it up to someone else–and you have absolutely no choice in the matter."

"I'm getting a little tired of you dictating my actions to me." For once, I was being honest about how I felt–maybe the word sounds hollow coming from me, but it was how I honestly felt. "I'm going to take off now, if that's all right with you," I announced.

"Try it and I'll stab you. Don't think for a moment that I came here unprepared."

"…"

My instinct told me she was lying.

An instinct, but not a true intuition–just the same simple conclusion anyone would come to. Since she came by plane, any kind of knife or blade she might have had would have been confiscated.

Then again, who knows, maybe she concocted an elaborate scheme to smuggle one in her checked baggage…and even if not, even if she hadn't prepared a weapon, one false move and she would probably leap over the table and try to kill me anyway.

That's how much she had suffered at my hands.

How much I had made her suffer.

That said, I had no intention of making it up to her. That would be plain rude to the money I made back then.

When it comes to money, you mustn't forget your manners.

Never, ever, ever.

But while on the one hand I felt nothing but antipathy at having my actions dictated to me like that, I was also overcome with curiosity.

If this wasn't about making it up to Senjogahara, who was I supposed to make it up to?

Who, and why?

Could it be that other girl?

Koyomi Araragi's little sister?

What was her name…Karen? Quite the brave little thing–not that we could ever be friends, but I have a soft spot for stupid kids like that. You might be surprised to learn that I actually really like kids. Which is why I remember her.

Hmm, maybe I could get on board if she was the one I was supposed to make it up to.

Like hell–why should I do anything for a cheeky little brat who would beat the shit out of me the second she saw me?

I'll pass, even if there's money in it. Actually, if there's money in it I'll consider it. At the very least I'll come to the negotiating table. After that, it's a question of how much.

"I'd prefer not to be stabbed. Fine, I give up. I'll hear you out. Whether I actually pay attention or not is another story…"

Curiosity 1, Antipathy 0.

I was pandering to a high school girl.

My pride would remain intact–pandering didn't begin to express my attitude towards her when she was a freshman, so why be haughty now.

"Let's hear it, Senjogahara. Who is it you want me to deceive? From your tone, I'm getting the sense that it's someone I know."

"Nadeko Sengoku."

Her response was concise and perfectly clear, which was a welcome change, but I had been wrong. It was a name that I had never heard before in my life.

Let's pause the action for a moment here while I explain the beginning of the affair, or rather fateful bond, between Hitagi Senjogahara and myself, Deishu Kaiki–I won't bore you with platitudes about how it comes from my personal perspective, and how it might deviate from the facts to some degree.

You won't catch me saying that.

First off, it's self-evident, so there's no need to say it; plus I told you right from the start that the truth doesn't exactly roll off my tongue.

There's something called "The Mouth of Truth" in some church in Rome that's supposed to bite a liar's hand off if he sticks it inside, but that itself is a lie… Anyway, in that vein, mine is like the Mouth of Half-Truth.

Don't bother thinking about how much of this is true.

It's chock-full of lies.

However true it may seem, don't believe it.

Two years ago, when Hitagi Senjogahara was an efflorescent first-year, newly matriculated at Naoetsu High, I was still in my effervescent teens–or was it my evanescent forties?

I was working as a ghostbuster at the time and received a professional inquiry from Senjogahara's mother. It was on behalf of her daughter, that being, of course, Senjogahara.

The girl was suffering from a mysterious ailment that rendered her weightless. She wasn't excessively thin but somehow weighed no more than a dozen pounds.

A mysterious ailment indeed.

If that's not a mysterious ailment, I don't know what is.

The doctors at her hospital made a case study out of it–which came with an honorarium, so at least as far as medical expenses were concerned, the family purse wasn't under so much pressure at that point.

Wait, is that true?

Or did her mother misappropriate that money as well? She had foolishly become involved with a shady religion, and apparently even her father's high-paying job at a foreign firm wasn't enough to keep up with her profligacy.

Well, maybe that's not such an unpardonable offense–if you ask me, it's not so different from those New Year's worshippers.

What's more, it was that shady religion that put her in touch with this "ghostbuster," so you won't hear me saying anything critical. How could I, I feel nothing but gratitude.

So, summoned to heal Senjogahara's mysterious ailment in my capacity as an exorcist of great spiritual power, I sucked up as much of the household fortune as I possibly could, and destroyed their family in the process.

Not only did I not cure the girl's ailment, I set her parents on the path to divorce, irreparably sundering her family, on top of which I helped myself to all the money that they hadn't already sunk into that shady religion. Family troubles tend towards the emotional, so they typically aren't paying much attention to money–a fact that I slyly exploited.

The particulars are a trade secret, but I should probably confess that the key was skillfully winning over papa and mama's darling only daughter.

I essentially took advantage of the naïveté of an adolescent, the tender feelings of a high school girl ground down by a bizarre illness. I exploited her emotional teenage heart, manipulated her parents like puppets on a string, and ultimately drove the family to ruin–looking back, it wouldn't have been surprising if she had stabbed me back then.

What's surprising is that I'm still alive.

At any rate, that's how it was: I made the money I could make, cheated who I could cheat, and ran off without a backward glance, but when I had reason to return to that town this year, or no, last year now, the middle of last year, I ran into a grown-up Hitagi Senjogahara–a girl I had forgotten about completely.

A *who the hell is this* girl.

Unlike two years earlier, the massive con I'd planned didn't go so smoothly. Hitagi Senjogahara and Koyomi Araragi blew the whole thing to hell. In that sense, she had already exacted her revenge on me.

My bottom line was obliterated, and I was forbidden from ever setting foot in that town again–well, I recouped the money from ol' Kagenui later on, so no problem there, but being banned from any place in Japan is seriously stressful for a freedom-loving guy like me or Oshino.

Still, I counted it a felicitous condition of my banishment that I'd never have to deal with Hitagi Senjogahara or Koyomi Araragi again–or Shinobu Oshino, that vampire who had cheated death.

Or I would have counted it so, but the woman who had forced me to make that deal in the first place had contacted me. And she didn't just contact me, she called a meeting, and what's more offered me work, and commissioned a con at that. What a train wreck.

It was absurd, really, I had every right to be angry.

"And Araragi…" I began, a thought occurring to me. I was concerned in a grandmotherly kind of way, if you would. "Does he know? That you're seeing me today like this? Aren't boyfriends and girlfriends supposed to visit a shrine together on New Year's Day and throw their money around like it was worthless?"

"Don't mock me." Senjogahara's expression didn't change at all as she said this. She continued, "He has no idea, obviously. He might kill you on sight. You're natural prey for a defender of justice like him."

"Hmph."

I hadn't intended to mock her–or had I? I don't know, but at any rate, her little trip to Okinawa was apparently a secret from Araragi.

Even if they didn't visit a shrine, you'd think they'd spend the day together–but maybe my sensibilities are outdated.

Maybe with cell phones, kids don't feel the need to be together physically.

As a swindler I try not to fall behind the times, but a generation gap is almost impossible to bridge.

Speaking of which, the con of mine that Senjogahara thwarted was targeted at middle schoolers–maybe that's why it failed?

Then again, they say if you're feeling your age, you're still young. I bet noticing someone else growing up or getting old is when you're feeling your age for real.

"No idea, huh? In other words…"

Reconciling my value system to Senjogahara's wasn't going to make my daily bread taste any better, so I decided to move the conversation along. If this dragged on, I wouldn't be able to get a return flight to Kyoto.

Not that there was anything left for me to do in the old capital, having finished my people-watching… Actually, a few more days in Okinawa sounded pretty appealing.

The climate, well within the range of "hot" despite it being New Year's Day, which is to say the dead of winter, was appealing indeed–I was totally comfortable in nothing but a Hawaiian shirt.

In fact, Senjogahara seemed too hot in her winter sailor blouse–was she planning to head home today? Or did she have a reservation at a hotel?

She didn't seem to have given it much thought.

Was there snow on the ground in her town? Kyoto wasn't getting much snow lately…

"In other words, you kept our meeting secret from Araragi."

"So what? Is it anything to try and make sure of repeatedly, or even just once?"

"It's not like that."

It was just a thought. To tell the truth, Koyomi Araragi and I had met without her knowledge–right after I had been banished from their town, so around August.

That was when he showed me the photo of her with short hair.

It was pretty damn brazen of me to go back there so soon after being banished–so let me guarantee that, since then, I've kept my promise and really haven't gone anywhere near their town. I don't know or care how much weight my guarantee carries, but anyway, that's why I asked her again.

Lovers keeping secrets from each other even as they looked out for each other, and engaging in more or less the same behavior as a result–it reminded me of the story of the man who sells his watch to buy a comb and the woman who sells her hair to buy a watch fob. Maybe Senjogahara, too, had sold her hair and bought a watch fob.

That stupid notion crossed my mind.

By the way, much as I go to a shrine every New Year's to do some fieldwork, as a part of my health regimen I've developed a habit of reading romance novels and watching "tear-jerker" dramas people are always talking about.

Exposing myself to the right books, and movies, and music, I reassure myself that they don't move me in the slightest.

I confirm my lack of emotion.

Unless you remind yourself that you're not going to become a decent, law-abiding citizen even by accident, who knows what might lead a human being astray?

If you're thinking that I'm totally enamored of my own unique sensibilities, then fine–all I'm trying to say is that Senjogahara and Araragi's behavior didn't touch me one bit.

It didn't.

Touch me.

One bit.

I just thought, *Are they morons?* Or rather, *They're definitely morons.*

"So, what's this about? You're willing to spend some of your precious final winter break of high school away from your boyfriend Araragi, and in secret, just to become my accomplice in a con? Who is this Nadeko Sengoku anyway, a romantic rival or something?"

"He's studying for exams and is up to his eyeballs in it whether it's winter break or New Year's Day."

"Huh," I nodded. I figured she was lying, which is why I nodded and didn't pry. Not being a man of character, I have no time for childish vanity. "What about your own exam prep?"

"I've been recruited, so it doesn't matter."

"Outstanding, how wonderful."

I wasn't just saying that, it was my honest response. Having suffered over those exams, I can't help but be impressed by an outstanding high school student–impressed, if not inspired.

I hadn't laid store in her for nothing. The girl laughed in the face of exam prep.

I was sorely disappointed that someone like her had come to me for help–maybe I'll spit those words and leave, I thought.

It was just a thought.

At that point the coffee and orange juice I'd ordered arrived–pretty slow, but not so much that you'd complain.

I swallowed a mouthful of coffee, but Senjogahara didn't even reach for her juice, didn't even take the wrapper off the straw. Maybe it was meant to show that she absolutely wouldn't accept any generosity from me. If so, then in spite of her school smarts, she was an idiot after all.

Like I'm ever going to treat you. Just the opposite–I was busy figuring out how to get you to pay for my coffee in the end, don't you see?

"Well, I have no idea what Araragi's academic performance is like," I said, "but if he's under your tutelage, then it's in the bag. You'll both be college students come spring."

I didn't mean anything by this idle remark and was just filling time, but Senjogahara responded, "No, we won't."

She was just disagreeing with me on principle. Or so I thought, but I was wrong.

"At this rate, there will be no springtime for me and Araragi."

"Hunh?"

"No future for us."

"Hunh?" I asked again, not taking her meaning. I had let my honest response slip out–and in so doing let the initiative slip through my fingers, despite having won the first-impression round.

Her words did arouse my interest, though.

No springtime.

No future.

What did she mean?

“If things proceed without a hitch, Araragi and I will be killed on graduation day.”

“Aha…”

I nodded, but it was not a nod of comprehension. I hadn’t gained any more info. Whether they were going to be killed at their high school graduation or their college entrance ceremony didn’t seem to matter. I’ll be damned if any manner of getting killed is shocking at a graduation but not an entrance ceremony.

It looked to me like Senjogahara was having trouble telling–like she was trying to figure out how to explain the predicament that she, or she and Araragi, were currently in.

Judging from her character–though by that I mean the Senjogahara I knew two years ago–this didn’t happen often.

Rough sailing ahead, it seemed.

Not that I cared. Smooth or rough, I couldn’t care less.

Still, it wouldn’t do if she clammed up or went around in circles, so I sent out a lifeboat. Ordinarily I would expect her to pay for passage, but we were old friends, so this time the trip was all expenses paid.

“In other words,” I took a wild guess, “you and Araragi somehow incurred a grudge, and this Nadeko Sengoku or whoever is going to kill you, so you want me to talk her out of it?” It wasn’t some feat of deduction; I pretty much made it up figuring I couldn’t be that far off, but…

“Basically,” Senjogahara responded, “that’s correct.”

I was surprised to see some respect mixed into her facial expression–if that level of guesswork was all it took for her most-hated foe to win her respect, then the girl was too damn soft.

Maybe I oughta pull one over on her again, I thought, seized by an irrational emotion akin to rage. It was way too irrational, so I suppressed my anger.

Knowing me, maybe I was actually happy that I'd won a kid's respect, in which case I'm the one who's soft. Maybe she had loosened me up–and I needed to tighten things back down.

"Getting killed is no laughing matter, though, is it," I remarked.

"Right, it's no laughing matter. It's a scary, terrifying story… So please, Mister Kaiki, hear me out," requested Senjogahara, suddenly formal–if that was a calculated move, forget being soft, the woman was a fearsome she-devil.

How could that standoffish freshman have ended up this way, was it my fault? Probably.

Well, whatever she-devil act she might put on, or however standoffish, it wasn't going to do the trick when she was still wearing those Groucho glasses.

"All you have to do is listen," she insisted. "If you tell me to take a hike, I will. Araragi and I will shut up and get killed–if that's our fate then so be it. No, if I get down on my knees and beg, at least he might be spared. I'll live out the remaining two-and-a-half months of my life with that one hope to console me."

"…"

What a pest.

When you take it too far, even an admirable attitude shades into sarcasm–but it had to be nothing but sarcasm to begin with. There

was not a chance in hell that she was trying to arouse any sympathy in me of all people.

"Sure, I'll listen," I said nonetheless. "Sometimes just talking about it can make you feel better. Sometimes it can take care of the whole problem."

As always, my mouth stabs my feelings in the back.

I knew perfectly well even then that talking about it wasn't going to make her feel better or take care of a goddamn thing.

"I said there was a person I want you to deceive, but Nadeko Sengoku is no longer a person."

Apparently, that was how Senjogahara had decided to begin her story.

"A-ha, interesting. If she's not a person, what is she?"

"A god. She became a serpent god, this past November."

"…"

For a moment I thought she was pulling my leg, but she wouldn't have come all the way to Okinawa to do that, not her.

I had to see where this was going. Maybe there was even some money to be made.

You never know where you might unearth a hot tip on a profitable venture.

"What I mean by *became a god*–"

Still, her story leapt all over the place and was almost impossible to follow (I hadn't expected the kid to be so bad at explaining, but in this case, at least, she didn't seem able to speak objectively about the situation), so to make things easier on myself, instead of just nodding along I jumped in wherever necessary.

Maybe she was inwardly delighted that I was so engaged by her tale, but the truth was just the opposite–I was fighting to retain any interest at all.

I enjoy watching other people getting it all wrong.

Which is why I can't give up lying.

"Is it fair to say–she's afflicted with a mysterious ailment like you were?"

"Right… A mysterious ailment, huh? Both of them are deities, at any rate."

For me–it was a crab.

And for her–a snake.

After adding this, she went on, "Even though both qualify as mysterious ailments, the situations are different insofar as I relied on a god, while she became one. Her condition is more acute, like an incurable disease. We can't say they're really the same."

What was she talking about, acting like she understood everything? Did she think her self-diagnosis made her cool? Just keep telling yourself that, honey.

She must have noticed my unimpressed reaction because she revised and simplified her take. "So yeah, a mysterious ailment."

My feelings don't really show, which made her an observant lady. Or maybe it was more like never forgetting how to ride a bike.

"You were operating in our town, so you might know the place. A shrine up on the hill called Kita-Shirahebi. That's where she's enshrined."

"Nope, doesn't ring a bell," I answered–because it did. "Either way, I don't totally follow when you say she's enshrined there. I mean, is Nadeko Sengoku currently being worshipped as a living

god?” Kita-Shirahebi, an abandoned shrine, one of those dilapidated and empty places Oshino likes so much. Hmm, why did it ring a bell, did Kagenui tell me about it or something? “A living god–an avatar of some kind.”

“Not quite… She swallowed a god whole, so to speak… Anyway, Nadeko Sengoku is no longer human, she’s become some kind of monstrosity.”

“Huh.”

Just like you were, and like your boyfriend still is, I started to say, but thought better of it.

Pissing her off would be fun, but also quite pointless. Who was human and who was a monster failed to interest me.

If there’s money to be made, I’ll treat a dog as a human being and elevate a fish to godhood–what do I care about biological classifications? Not human? No one is more inhuman than me.

“In a nutshell, Nadeko Sengoku has become freaking unreal. A destroy-the-entire-town-if-she-feels-like-it class of being,” Senjogahara summarized, roughly, no doubt leaving some things out–not because it was too complicated but because she couldn’t tell me, I’m sure.

It seemed kind of highhanded to ask someone to listen and then not share everything, but demanding people to give you the whole scoop since they came to you wouldn’t be any better.

All I needed was the bare essentials. To that end, I decided to put some supplementary questions to her.

“How did this girl contract such an ailment? From what you say, it sounds like she’s your classmate–”

“No. She’s in middle school.”

Dear me, this time my guess was wide of the mark–I got a little carried away. Must have hurt my standing, but this raised more questions than it answered.

“What year?”

“Second… Listen, Kaiki, are you for real?”

“Hm?”

“I mean… Are you just messing with me, playing dumb like usual, or does it really not ring a bell? The name Nadeko Sengoku.”

“…”

That got me thinking. The way she said it, the way she quizzed me, could it be that I actually knew Nadeko Sengoku?

But I’m a legitimate adult. Well, maybe not legitimate, even kind of half-assed, but of a certain age at least. I don’t know too many middle school students–oh.

I see.

That must be it.

Got it.

“If she’s in middle school in that town where you live, she must be one of the kids I conned last year.”

That’s why Senjogahara had gone on about making it up to whomever. She’d put me on the spot and crazily told me to take responsibility because Nadeko Sengoku was one of my victims.

What a load of shit. But it was Senjogahara herself who fine-tuned my understanding of the situation. “Strictly speaking, she wasn’t a direct victim–she was victimized by one of your victims. I guess she’s your indirect victim.”

“Ah. Like a chain of bankruptcies brought on by a con. Right, it’s precisely due to these chains of victimization that fraud transcends individuals and is a social ill.” I meant it as a kind of *look who’s talking* joke but seemed to have touched a nerve with her ladyship.

As soon as I noticed her grabbing the glass of orange juice that she hadn’t touched once, its contents were all over my face. It was such a fluid, seamless motion that I had no time to react.

Since not just the orange juice but also the ice cubes in the glass exploded into my face, it hurt more than it was cold.

Like someone had used Ice Shard on me.

I was really glad I was wearing sunglasses–though my brand-new Hawaiian shirt was soaked.

The waitress raced up fit to burst, but I beat her to the punch. “My apologies, she seems to have spilled her orange juice everywhere. I’m terribly sorry, but would you please bring another glass?”

Faced with my total composure despite the fact that I was sopping wet, the waitress had no choice but to assent and withdraw.

The saving grace here was that Senjogahara was quick to lose it but not prone to hysterics–she just coolly looked away by the time I was smoothing things over with the waitress. As if nothing that ever happened in the world had anything to do with Hitagi Senjogahara.

I suppose not even the most veteran waitress would expect a cheerful guy in a Hawaiian shirt and a high school girl wearing Groucho glasses to be having a serious fight.

As I wiped my face with a freshly supplied hand towel, Senjogahara finally broke her silence.

“Don’t treat me like a kid.”

Don't treat me like a kid–she used to tell me that before, too, but since the age gap between us wasn't closing, Senjogahara, at least as a minor, would sadly only ever be a kid in my eyes.

Seeing as she said it after the fact, though, I didn't think that was why she'd treated me to orange juice.

No point in needling her about it, however. I understood why she was pissed–the joke had been a little over the line. I'd gone and done it, and belatedly my heart grew full. I have a bad habit of overplaying the humor card and am lucky the image hasn't stuck.

My looks never served me well, but personality-wise I'm not that different from Oshino–apart from not being such a chump, needless to say.

"I'm sorry," apologized Senjogahara, surprisingly, earth-shatteringly, once the new orange juice had arrived. "That wasn't how someone with a favor to ask should behave."

"Don't give it a second thought. An adult can't get upset every time a child acts out," I assured her–sarcastically, of course. I steeled myself against another helping of orange juice, or ice cube barrage, but Senjogahara just barely managed to control herself.

I swear I saw her right arm twitch, but we'll chalk it up to my imagination–just to be generous. Whatever the case, she'd learned how to hold back.

No, maybe she was enduring it for the sake of her beloved boyfriend.

How beautiful.

Not that beauty does anything for me.

At best I can comprehend that people might find the thing in question beautiful.

“Anyway, you’re the one who dragged Nadeko Sengoku into the realm of aberrations, if only indirectly–in which case, doesn’t even a vile fiend like you feel some pang of responsibility?”

“I do, I do. I feel crushed to death by my sense of responsibility. I absolutely have to atone for it. I’ll make it up to her, no matter what it takes. So tell me, Senjogahara, what should I do?”

I tend to run off at the mouth, which was very much what happened here. I just said whatever popped into my head–even I have to admit it was weird. Did I want to be showered with orange juice that badly? I’m not on a championship sports team and have no reason to be doused with beverages.

But Senjogahara was tenacious. And tough. She got on board with my joke, er, misstep. “Like I said. I want you to deceive Nadeko Sengoku and save me and Araragi.”

Save.

I’d heard the same word two years ago–from Hitagi Senjogahara’s lips. What the hell must she have been feeling to repeat it to the person who had betrayed her so cruelly?

What must she have been feeling? To be honest, I can’t even imagine. Not that I know where in my heart this honesty resides. Or where my heart resides, period.

Save, huh?

Me, save Senjogahara, and Araragi.

It sounded like a bad joke. Not being averse to bad jokes, I was starting to have fun.

Hearing it justified this whole trip to Okinawa–now I just needed to pick up some local sweets before heading back to feel like I’d gotten my money’s worth. It was time to get going.

“Are you telling me to pull one over on a god?”

“You can, can’t you? When you claim, rightly or not, to be the greatest swindler under the sun, you ought to be up to it.”

I’ve never claimed any such thing. Could she not go around fabricating monikers for me? I’m just a stingy swindler.

“What’s the matter? Not confident you can pull it off?”

It was a cheap provocation. Bargain basement.

So I took Senjogahara’s question as just that: a simple question. Every once in a while, even I take what people say at face value–no idea why this was such a moment.

“Oh, I can. In fact, pulling one over on a mere god doesn’t take any confidence. There’s no one I can’t con.”

Ouch. I might as well have called myself the greatest swindler under the sun. What the hell was I saying?

“So you can deceive the murderous little girl and talk her out of killing us so Araragi and I can live on?”

“Sure.”

Despite having realized my mistake, I somehow didn’t modify my approach, and my mouth just went and made it worse. Come on, mouth, whose side are you on?

“Strictly speaking, it’s me, Araragi, and his little blond loli slave.”

“Keep ’em coming. Add five more loli slaves, and it’ll still be a cinch.”

My mouth’s out-of-control joyride finally stopped thereabouts. I really needed to get the brakes checked.

“Okay. In that case–”

“But,” I regained my footing before Senjogahara could finish, “all I’m saying is that I can. Whether or not I will is a different question.” I

wasn’t going to be railroaded into anything, thank you. I’m the boss of me. “First off, the reason I con people is for money. Why deceive this Nadeko Sengoku if it won’t net me a red cent? A middle school girl, god or not, getting tricked is just heartbreaking, isn’t it.”

“I…” Senjogahara seemed to falter, but continued, “will pay you. Of course.”

“Hmph. ‘Of course’? As if you had the spending power.”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover. I won the lottery since the last time you saw me and am immensely wealthy.”

“Glad to hear it,” I assented half-heartedly, not interested in humoring her. I had other things on my mind.

I was doing some preliminary calculations, just for fun.

If I did swindle a god, just how much would that be worth? Even with that dilapidated shrine restored, I didn’t imagine the place had much in the way of assets. In fact, the land and buildings belonged to humans, and the god probably didn’t own anything.

Plus she was in middle school.

Fleecing middle schoolers of their pocket money might prove lucrative if it were on a large scale like last time, but a single mark wouldn’t yield much.

In other words, squeezing any profit out of the target of the con herself, Nadeko Sengoku, was nigh impossible. The fruitless endeavor wouldn’t net me a red cent, and if you ask me, a fruitless endeavor isn’t work. It’s playtime. Why should I amuse myself by playing around with a bunch of kids?

“I’ll pay you,” Senjogahara repeated–not to emphasize the fact, it seemed, but almost as though she couldn’t keep up a conversation with me otherwise.

If that was her thinking, she was damn right. I'd never amuse myself by playing around with schoolchildren unless "money" was involved, but if I could get an hourly wage for it, I'd do any amount of babysitting.

To put it in extreme terms, as long as I get paid, I don't even care if it's a good deal. Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves.

Incidentally, that proverb is pretty old, so what with inflation, maybe "pennies" should be updated to something a bit larger–though I value pennies nonetheless, and may the pounds take care of me in the end.

"For the moment, I can give you 100,000 yen up front, in cash… That's the same amount I paid Mister Oshino for his assistance. When he cured my mysterious ailment–"

"Then take that money to Oshino and ask him to help you again," I said curtly.

Curtly–but I ended up feeling as if I had actually given her a piece of sound and sympathetic advice. Dispensing it for nothing, how mortifying! What kind of a swindler am I?

"Well, Mister Oshino is nowhere to be found… We've been looking for him, and Miss Hanekawa even searched overseas."

"…"

Hanekawa? My mask slipped slightly at the sudden mention of an unfamiliar name. In other words, I let some emotion show on my face. Somehow, I felt a meaningless–or maybe meaningful–antipathy towards the name.

Senjogahara seemed to pick up on it and said, "Miss Hanekawa is my friend and classmate. A girl with big boobs," adding the flippant

bit in an utterly cool tone–whatever that was supposed to explain, it did get my attention.

Or rather, thanks to it, I failed to properly conjure a character who even went overseas searching for someone on behalf of her friend. Does breast size really carry so much weight? If I had huge tits, it might blast away my identity as a con man.

In any case, Senjogahara had effectively kept this girl, Hanekawa, beyond my malign influence. Well done.

“If Oshino”–this was information of a caliber that I’d have liked to be paid for as well, but since she had told me about Hanekawa, sharing this about him in return made us even. Inside me, an eleventh-hour deal was struck–“really wants to remain hidden, no one will be able to find him. He and I have extremely similar behavior patterns, but the difference is that he hates civilization. People who hate civilization don’t leave much of a trace and are hard to track down. A drawback of the world’s precipitous transformation into an information society.”

“Right. You, meanwhile, were easy to track down… Aren’t you a little too free with your spending? How much money do you have right now? I bet you’re poorer than I am.”

It was none of her concern.

There was no call for her to feel concerned.

I hadn’t fallen so low that I needed some high school student worrying over my finances–when I see a penny on the street, I pick it up, but that has nothing to do with what’s going on inside my wallet.

I certainly wasn’t poorer than Senjogahara, at least I think not. Assuming she hadn’t actually won the lottery.

“As things stand, I have no debts–my work just involves a high rate of failure. Thanks to high schoolers interfering and whatnot…

Overall I'm breaking even, or a little bit in the black–poverty is a stranger to industry, as they say."

"I know what the answer will be, I know I'm wishing for a miracle, but Kaiki, may I ask you something anyway?"

"What?"

"Having made trouble for me and Araragi in the past, and also to make things up to Nadeko Sengoku, would you consider working pro bono?"

"When hell freezes over."

"That's what I figured."

Senjogahara actually seemed satisfied by my instantaneous response, but since there was still a chance that she had the wrong impression, and was betting on my conscience or humanity even now, I decided to dispel any such illusions. Maybe I am a nice guy after all.

"Totally out of the question, and in fact, for my part, I don't want anything more to do with you or Araragi. I won't say that I don't want to see your faces or hear your voices again, but that just means I'm not saying it. I'm a coward, I don't have any desire to deal with wackos like you. And I don't have anything to make up to some kid that I've never even heard of."

"A hundred thousand yen–isn't enough, then?"

"Well… …it's not," I said, tentatively clacking the beads of my mental abacus.

I couldn't be sure without hearing the particulars, but bamboozling a god would mean operating on a large scale. And the consequences of failure would be huge, too.

Put plainly, it was a job that even a chump like Oshino might turn down–like hell a hard case like me was going to take it on.

A hundred thousand yen didn't even cut it as down payment, in which case there was nothing further to discuss.

"So…exactly how much do I have to pay for you to con Nadeko Sengoku? Give me a number. We'll call the hundred thousand a deposit, with the understanding that I'll get together a less insulting sum as soon as I can."

"Desperate, aren't you, with your life on the line. Or is it that your sweetheart's life is precious? If the absolute maximum you could pay is only enough to save one of you, who'd you choose, I wonder? Yourself or Araragi?"

"Araragi, no question about it."

"Yeah, yeah."

She gave the answer I'd expected. Whatever she felt in her heart of hearts, had she given any other, she wouldn't be Senjogahara. At least not the Senjogahara I knew.

I was relieved–people might turn over new leaves, but their basic character didn't change so easily.

Yet I was wholeheartedly disappointed by what she said next.

"Indicate a concrete sum please, Kaiki. However much it might be, I'll pay it. It's precisely seventy-four days until graduation. With that much time, I can put together a considerable amount of money… I'll even sell my body if need be."

My cup was still about half full, and I had no qualms about tossing the remaining coffee in her face.

Maybe it was supposed to be a joke, or a bluff–the latter was more likely, but I didn't care. It was a good opportunity for her to learn that some people are immune to such strategies. If the table had not been between us, if I had been slightly closer, I would have

punched her in the face instead, so in fact she was lucky–not to mention, my coffee had already gotten cold.

"Where's the bathroom?" I preempted the same waitress, who rushed over to see what was happening this time. Having beat her to the punch again, I went where she indicated–leaving her to ask the high school girl what had happened, but Senjogahara wasn't going to fill her in.

I went into the bathroom and squared myself up in front of the mirror.

There I would find a cheerful man in sunglasses and a Hawaiian shirt–I thought, but I was the only one who'd been under that impression. My reflection in the mirror was in fact distinctly gloomy.

I guess you can't alter your nature just by changing your appearance.

Koyomi Araragi would still call me "ominous" and be done with it.

I took off the sunglasses and hung them on my shirt like you see all the time on TV.

"Okay, Q&A time," I said. For me, this was a kind of ritual for *getting in the zone,* though I'm not sure I'm using the phrase correctly. "Do I have any desire to work pro bono on behalf of Araragi and Senjogahara? Is it unacceptable for me to stand by and watch my former rivals get unceremoniously slaughtered?"

I answered without hesitation.

"NO. Absolutely not. If I'm not careful, I might even enjoy it."

Probably I'd just feel nothing, and with that last bit I was pretending to be more evil than necessary. It might seem like I was wasting my time with that question, but I wasn't if I saw it as *buresuto.*

Just to be clear, I'm not talking about boobs, but about brainstorming.

"In that case, is there anything I can do pro bono on behalf of Nadeko Sengoku, who is evidently in the grips of a mysterious ailment?"

I answered this one, too, without hesitation.

"NO. Who the hell is she, anyway? I don't care."

Moving on, I said, "What if it's a question of atonement toward a naïve young lady named Senjogahara whom I deceived in the past? Not as a former rival, but as an old acquaintance, do I want to do something for her, or her family?"

But the response was still: "NO. No I do not. I have no qualms over it." I added, "Even if some girl from a family I swindled is forced to sell herself, I won't change my way of life one bit."

If that was how I felt, why had I thrown coffee in her face? What to do with me–well, nothing. I've learned to live with that much of a contradiction. That's me, who I am.

"Then what about Araragi? Hmm… I did torment his little sister, didn't I. And I did sell him out to Kagenui on top of that. Maybe I owe him some change from that transaction. As a change of pace, so to speak, what about saving the guy's life?" The me in the mirror answered, "NO. Even if he had some change coming to him, it wouldn't be nearly enough. This little trip's price tag already more than makes up for anything I might owe him."

I'd been able to use my pre-paid Premium Pass for the airplane ticket, but the bus fare to the airport and the Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses were out-of-pocket expenses.

“What else… Oh yeah, this Hanekawa girl. Am I touched by her over-the-top gallantry in going overseas for the sake of her friend? Or maybe the little lady is loaded. I might milk her parents. NO.”

I didn’t even have to think about it for a second, didn’t even have to pause.

The name Hanekawa set off alarm bells. Simply hearing it set off the specific alarm bell for a nemesis among nemeses, someone to be avoided at all costs (yes, it sounded the first time I met Gaen-senpai), when I didn’t even know her first name. This Hanekawa character coming up in connection with the job was definitely a negative–or positive, since I didn’t want to take the job in the first place. Wasn’t I being handed a reason to decline with a smile?

No good. Think as I might, there was no reason to take the job. Not only was there nothing to be gained, it could only mean a loss for me.

What to do?

“Ah, right,” I suddenly remembered–pondering Hanekawa had unconsciously put me in mind of Gaen-senpai, which reminded me that there was someone else in that town.

Her niece, in other words her older sister Toé’s only daughter, her legacy, you might say–her surname had changed, though. Suruga Kanbaru.

She probably didn’t consider herself a member of the Gaen clan–which didn’t alter the fact that she was Toé Gaen’s daughter.

Yes, and wasn’t Suruga Kanbaru, whom I ended up not seeing, a student at Naoetsu High, and Senjogahara’s buddy prior to that?

I’d heard about it two years ago: in middle school, Senjogahara had only one person she could call a close friend–and they were dubbed the Valhalla Duo, or the Valkyrie Duo… That was when the

name Suruga Kanbaru first made it onto my radar. At the time, her left arm was just a left arm, of course, so I had no reason to get involved and was simply glad that she seemed to be doing fine…

Hitagi Senjogahara and Suruga Kanbaru. Did they still hang out together?

I bet they did. It wasn't a groundless assumption, even if it was a little arbitrary. My first encounter with Araragi had been in front of Kanbaru's house. If the two were connected, it was only natural to imagine that Senjogahara and Kanbaru were, too–and even if they weren't, Kanbaru and Araragi definitely were.

Whether it was a friendly relationship, I couldn't say… Still, Kanbaru was Gaen-senpai's niece, and Toé Gaen's daughter, and if she inherited at least some portion of their personality, she would be quite compatible with someone like Araragi.

I'd go ahead and think so.

"Hff…" I took a breath.

A deep breath–and at last posed my final question to the mirror.

"Could I deceive Nadeko Sengoku and save the lives of that detestable twosome if it were for Suruga Kanbaru's sake?"

I answered my own question with a resounding YES.

When I got back to my seat, Senjogahara had removed her Groucho glasses. I assumed she'd taken it off temporarily so she could wipe off the coffee that was all over her face, and once it was off, had come to her senses and said no. She maintained her cool, though, giving no hint of any such inner conflict or the fact that she'd had coffee thrown in her face.

"I'll do it," I said, sitting down.

Did my voice sound too high, or odd in any way? I was a little worried, but there was no point in worrying, and it might start

sounding even odder if I became self-conscious, so I gave up thinking about it. Lazily.

If I was agitated, then I was agitated, no big deal.

I knew full well this was unlike me.

“You’ll do…” Senjogahara eyed me suspiciously. I understood how she felt, all too well. I was flabbergasted, myself. “…what?”

“The job. What else? The god-conning job, I’m doing it.”

“Are you in your right mind?”

This was rude of her, but again, I understood how she felt. No other word for it. I totally agreed with her on the subject.

“I am in my right mind. Now hand over the hundred thou you said you could pay upfront.”

“…”

Senjogahara removed a manila envelope from her bag and laid it on the table, not even bothering to hide her acute unease.

I checked the contents. Ten 10,000-yen notes, indeed. No newspaper or anything mixed in.

…Like anyone would try that in this day and age.

“Good. This will do.”

“No, that’s just the down payment…a deposit–”

“I’m telling you this is enough,” I said. Forcefully. “If I actually demanded a commensurate sum for this job, you’d come up short even if you sold yourself. However gruelingly you toiled. I’m taking this cash just to cover my expenses. I’m resigned to working for free, but I don’t want to take a loss, either. If my expenses exceed 100,000 yen, I’ll bill you for the rest, all right?”

“But that’s… That’s…”

I surmised that Senjogahara's apparent hesitation came less from a sense of guilt at using me so cheaply, and more from a deep desire not to be in my debt.

Well, she was right to be wary.

But I had no intention of getting into a debate about it. One conversational misstep and there was a real danger that I would change my mind. Despite what I said or how I may have acted earlier, if things went the wrong way I was liable to tell her to get me the money even if that meant prostituting herself.

That's how little I trusted in my own humanity.

I trusted myself even less than she did.

In order to convince Senjogahara, or rather, to wrap things up quickly, I considered fudging the whole issue and manipulating her emotions with a little lip service ("I couldn't bear for you two to die"? Or no, something trendier, like "I'm not doing this for you"), but that strategy seemed doomed to fail, so I abandoned it.

This is just my personal opinion, but women tend to hate lip service even more than men do. Probably because women are in a position to be coerced by it more often.

So they know how ugly pretty words can be.

Instead I decided to put the kibosh on any more talk about money. Take a good look because it's the first and last time you'll ever see me doing that. "It's fine, just drop it. It's settled, end of discussion. All I will accept from you is this hundred thousand for expenses, and nothing more. Should they be greater, I will bill you separately. In the event that some money remains unused after the job has been brought to a satisfactory conclusion, I will keep the rest and not bother you with any detailed accounting. I will accept the job only under these terms."

"…Agreed."

Amidst a heady brew of dissatisfied reluctance, Senjogahara ultimately acquiesced–considered apart from any humanity I may or may not possess, these were unmistakably sweet terms.

Hence her caution, I suppose. There was no question she'd been grasping at straws when she'd gotten in touch with me, she'd had nothing to lose–so she should count herself lucky.

Well, whether she had grasped at straws or drawn the short straw didn't concern me, and either way, I wasn't guaranteeing success.

Although this flies in the face of my earlier boast, to be something close to honest about how I really felt, I was saying that I would but not that I could–I'd deceived countless people since the day I first pulled one over on my kindergarten teacher, but I had yet to dupe a god.

"Okay then…if I may explain the situation in detail–"

"I'd rather not hear the details from the horse's mouth, actually. I don't work like Oshino, you see–taking personal feelings and circumstances into account makes things too complicated," I said, taking the sunglasses, which I had completely forgotten about, from where they were hanging on my Hawaiian shirt and putting them on again.

I didn't go so far as to tell her that her take on this case would be too subjective, but it's my oft-repeated pet theory that a partisan view of things isn't any good.

This is perhaps another difference between Oshino and me. I'm not saying he's partisan, but he does value every individual's standpoint and avoids taking too objective a stance.

We haven’t seen each other in a while, so I don’t know if that still holds true.

“I’ll investigate the details and the particulars myself. I’ve got a general grasp of the situation from the broad strokes you’ve given me thus far.”

In fact I had no grasp of anything, I was fumbling in the dark, but it was better to leave her with this false impression of confidence. Better to make her think I was reliable–I didn’t need her trust, but if I couldn’t get her to leave things to me to a certain degree, I couldn’t do my job.

Having kids underfoot while you’re working is a real nuisance as it is.

“There are a few things I would like to clarify, though–do you mind?”

“G-Go ahead.”

Senjogahara nodded but seemed to have lost some of her composure–she probably felt apprehensive because things were going so smoothly for her. Basically, just like two years ago, she had an extremely low tolerance for happiness and good fortune.

She was tough in the face of adversity, but that was as far as it went.

Such people are surprisingly common: they can get by in society no problem, but they’ll never become a success.

I mulled over her future. Even if she survived this, what might the future hold for her? Not that it had anything to do with me.

Not that I gave a shit.

“Are you positive that we have seventy-four days left? There’s that saying of ours about gossip lasting seventy-five days… But that count includes today, correct?”

“Yes–the Naoetsu High graduation ceremony is on March fifteenth. That afternoon, in other words after the ceremony, Araragi and I, and Shinobu Oshino, not even permitted to celebrate, will get killed.”

“This is definite? Absolutely definite? Might not Her Godliness lose patience and decide to kill you right now, for instance?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Why? To put it in stark terms, you, and probably Araragi as well, are attempting to ensure your own survival, whether through me or via some other plan. That must not sit well with a god. You can’t rule out the possibility that she might bring you both to a bad end in a fit of rage before the appointed day.”

I was dubious that this god was going to keep her promise just because she was a god, but Senjogahara declared, “I can rule it out. I can definitely rule it out. Nadeko Sengoku could not be any angrier than she already is–at this very moment. But Araragi and I are still alive. Which means she at least intends to keep her promise. She was at the peak of her anger when she made the promise, to begin with.”

“Okay, that’s what I want to ask you most. It’s the one thing I need to hear from your own lips. What the hell did you, the two of you, do to incur the wrath of Nadeko Sengoku? What did you do to warrant a death sentence?”

If I had victimized her, however indirectly, and that fact had fed into the present situation, shouldn’t she kill yours truly instead? No, if contracting a mysterious ailment and becoming a god, a great achievement you might say, was something that made this middle school kid happy, then maybe she ought to be grateful to me–but I found it a little hard to believe that a god would bother to kill a particular human being, let alone give advance notice.

For instance, destroying the Kyoto shrine I visited earlier that day might invite divine punishment, but surely I wouldn't be struck dead.

So why?

Why were Senjogahara and Araragi going to get killed?

Killed by Nadeko Sengoku?

"I," answered Senjogahara–or strictly speaking, didn't answer–concluding her sentence with, "…don't know."

"Hey, hey. How can you not know?"

"I really don't know. I mean, of course, how can I put this… There were things that might have caused it, failures, misconceptions, misunderstandings, mistakes, but…I'm not sure how we could really end up here because of them… There must be something behind the scenes that totally belies the way Araragi and I see it… I stole that idea from Miss Hanekawa, though."

Hanekawa again. I tried once more to picture her but only conjured up an image of enormous breasts. Fearsome.

"Anyway, just to give you a jumping-off point, think of it as a romantic snafu. Before Nadeko Sengoku became a god, she had a crush on Araragi, but he had a girlfriend–that kind of thing."

"…And what a vulgar thing it is," I opined. I'm not sure if it was my honest reaction. I have a feeling that I did find it vulgar, and also a feeling that I didn't. "Fine. That's plenty. I'll look into it on my own–but just to be sure… This goes without saying, so saying it feels stupid, but this time is an exception, right?"

"Huh? Exception?"

"Come on. I'm asking if it's okay for me to set foot in your town. You can't possibly be asking me to do this remotely, like some armchair detective–because I wouldn't know an armchair if it came up and bit me on the ass."

“Of course, obviously. This case is an exception, or let’s say, special, so feel free…but be careful. Plenty of people have a score to settle with you. Make sure you don’t end up as a John Doe who got viciously beaten to death by middle schoolers.”

Terrifying words, my lady. I was already leaving beautiful Okinawa for snow country, and her warning did not add to my enthusiasm.

I was relieving my Hawaiian shirt of its post, for sure. Oshino wears the things all year round… Must be the Endless Summer in that head of his. More Brazil, you might say, than Hawaii.

“This is also obvious,” added Senjogahara, “but please don’t let Araragi see you.”

“Hmph…right. Well, I don’t want to see him either. Araragi is one thing, but that loli slave of his is liable to kill me.”

Did I also need to watch out for his little sister? Karen, the girl with the ponytail–though she wouldn’t necessarily have one now.

“Okay. I’ll begin my investigation right away–but I don’t want you thinking this will be over in a day or two, Senjogahara. Not that I intend to take the full seventy-four, but expect it to take at least a month.”

“Sure. I’m ready for a long campaign. Or it’s already been a long campaign. Still, I’ll take the liberty of remaining in frequent contact. I may have commissioned you, but trusting you completely is, for me, an impossibility.”

“That’s fine. Don’t trust me. Be suspicious,” I said, before trying to drain my coffee cup at a gulp. I’d forgotten that it was empty since I’d thrown the contents in Senjogahara’s face. Remembering my claim to be vacationing in Okinawa, I muttered, “I guess my stay here ends today,” as I began to hatch my plans.

Hatch… What was I, a mother hen?

We'll say a bit of fowl play suited me fine.

"I should be able to catch a flight that puts me in your town before the end of the day…but best if we took different ones. It'd be no joke if Araragi learned we'd been on the same plane."

"Yeah, totally. By the way, Kaiki."

"What?"

"Um…think you could lend me the plane fare home?"

At that point, I decided to abandon the five or six other cons I had going. To abandon and abjure them. To act as if they had never existed. After all, they might have been another one of my lies.

Either way, handing Hitagi Senjogahara her plane fare, I sent her on ahead of me then headed to a convenience store inside the airport.

I wanted to buy a pen and notebook–the 8 ½ x 11 variety, but unfortunately they didn't have any that size, so I ended up with a memo pad, which was a little smaller than I would have liked. A Tokyu Hands or a Loft would have done the trick, but apparently neither chain has outlets in Okinawa.

I jumped right into my preparations while I waited for the flight–I clearly couldn't stay in that town itself, so I made a reservation at a business hotel in a shopping district more than a half-hour away by train.

One week, to begin with.

I didn't use a false name because I didn't think it necessary, but Deishu Kaiki already sounds like a fake name, and since I don't have a fixed home, I had to lie through my teeth to fill out the address section.

The cost of the stay would pretty much use up the 100,000 yen (strictly speaking, Senjogahara's plane fare had already taken care of some of it), but travel and hotel expenses are something that I always have to contend with anyway, so in this instance I decided not to include them.

Oh, but Senjogahara.

How reckless, to come to Okinawa without enough money to get home–or maybe it was that unexpected for her that I actually took the job. If I refused, she would still have the entire 100,000 yen available, but perhaps she was simply terrible with money. She was the only daughter of a formerly wealthy family even if they had fallen on hard times.

As I made phone calls, laying the groundwork and getting the ball rolling on gathering info, it came time for my flight to depart–I would arrive there before the end of the day, but only just. It would be quite late at night, so while it was true that I was getting underway today, the real investigation wouldn't start until tomorrow.

In which case, I wanted to work on my plan in the meantime.

I love planning any con, let alone a huge job like this. Pulling one over on a god? I was like a kid in a candy store.

Unlike the stream-of-unconscious lies that flow out of my mouth, a systematic con is an art form–yikes, that came out sounding like a lie.

How embarrassing.

It's really just a matter of prudence… But since my student days, I've always enjoyed making plans for summer vacation and so on. This is truly true. It might be a lie, but it's true. A lie that might be true. Whatever, who cares, I'm just putting up a smokescreen.

I used the time waiting for the plane, and the time on the plane, to steadily think things through–opening the notebook, I used a whole spread to draw a map first.

A map.

A map of that town.

A map of the town from which I was temporarily un-banished.

I had only vague memories to rely on for certain areas, but having drawn one a little over six months ago, I didn't have all that much difficulty.

A map it was, but the scale and relative positions didn't need to be correct. It was simply an approximation, a tool for visualizing a situation.

Visualization.

Basically my own kind of mental map.

So more like an illustration than a map.

It's much easier to picture things when you start drawing. At least it is for me.

Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, whose location I knew, secondhand; MS 701, which I believe Nadeko Sengoku attended while she was human; Naoetsu High, where Senjogahara and Araragi go; the Kanbaru residence; the Araragi residence–maybe I didn't need to draw in Tsuganoki Second Middle, Araragi's little sisters' school, since it was a little farther away? No, better include it, just to be on the safe side. I crammed the blank spread with info that might come in handy, info that might not.

I also drew recognizable caricatures of the involved parties whose faces I knew, like Senjogahara and Araragi. Those two, in particular, had names that looked scary if I wrote them out.

In cartoon form, they became cute kids.

Naturally it wasn't just those two. I fluidly drew all the middle schoolers I had duped back then whose faces I could still bring to mind.

When the spread was full, I turned to a fresh one for a somewhat more specific map. If the previous pages were an overview, this was a detail. The scale was still completely screwy, but if I needed precise distances, I could just use the mapping app on my smart phone.

It might come across as a strange activity to whoever's sitting next to you on a plane, but that didn't bother me. This was my own internal visualization aid, and if they peeked, they still wouldn't get it; for anything I really couldn't have anyone seeing, I use codes.

Thanks to the cute illustrations, people might even get the mistaken impression that I'm a manga artist.

Speaking of, back in the day, I think in college, I showed one of these visualization aids to Gaen-senpai, who said, "Looks like a walkthrough for a dating sim." It brought me down, and I gave it up for a while–but no other method took, and I went back to it soon enough.

My drawings and notations almost completely filled the notebook, and it was at that point that we landed.

The snow was piled high, a real winter wonderland–but all I felt was cold. Confirming that I wasn't moved, that I lacked any such sensibility, I called Senjogahara.

"I'm here."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Yup."

That was all we said to each other.

All we said.

Check in to the hotel, take a hot shower, drink a little saké, go to bed, and in the morning any desire to do this job will have completely evaporated–that's what I expected, but that's not how it went. Apparently my engine was already revving, independent of my own will, or of Senjogahara's or anyone else's for that matter. Once it gets going, not even I can stop it.

That's a lie.

I know I can stop anytime I choose, which allows me to tackle work with a certain level of motivation. Although I wanted to meet Toé Gaen's legacy at some point during the job if I could, well, that might be impossible this time around.

Maybe not impossible, but best let it go.

I had to work behind the scenes, so I should avoid unnecessary interactions–and contacts. I'd wait patiently for the day when Suruga Kanbaru left the confines of that town.

It was January second.

Hence most stores wouldn't be open–is an outdated notion. The shopping district where my hotel was located was in the middle of its New Year sale.

I wanted to take advantage of this to procure a number of items.

Honestly, mingling with the crowds of customers clamoring for a lucky-dip was a pain in the ass (I don't mind crowds per se. I like places with lots of people, I just hate becoming part of the crowd myself), but reminding myself that it was all part of the job made it bearable. Swindling is no walk in the park; the crooked path to making money is longer than the straight and narrow one. The requisite qualities, in other words, are patience and endurance.

When you get right down to it, giving it my all just to hoodwink a single middle school girl was nuts, but I would think of it as an investment. I wasn't sure what kind, or towards what, but I can stand just about anything if I think of it as an investment.

A little after ten I hung the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the knob of my hotel room door and sallied forth into town.

I always slick my hair back, but that day I didn't. Not because it was a hassle, though, I had a reason not to.

While I shopped, I mulled things over.

Fundamentally, I prefer to work alone no matter what the job, but that doesn't mean I don't enlist the help of other people. You might say that's the same thing, but it's completely different. My preferred business model, in short, is to accept helping hands but never lend a hand.

Especially with a big (if you ignore the fact that, all told, I was conning a single middle school girl) job like this, I couldn't help but think that it might be a good idea to enlist some help.

I had finished reaching out, the previous day, to a necessary minimum of people who served as sources and informants, but I wanted to rope in a local or two if possible. Having to keep my identity secret meant I couldn't operate openly.

Enlisting their help is quite a modest way to put it for a swindler, because it's more like using them–but I try to stay away from mock-evil manners of speech. I'm not some kind of slave driver, and I intended to pay them a generous stipend of around 10,000 yen each.

Locals…

Naturally, the first person that came to mind was Suruga Kanbaru, but I'd already decided to let that go this time around. In which case, who would be good?

I cast my mind over the likenesses I had drawn in my notebook the day before.

And I thought, *What about the Fire Sisters?* Koyomi Araragi's little sisters, Karen and Tsukihi. I didn't know what Tsukihi looked like, but…all the middle school girls in town wanted to be like them. When I was there laying the groundwork for my last con, I was on guard–yet somehow they slipped through the cordon.

As with Kanbaru, though for a different reason, I'd been thinking the day before that I absolutely needed to avoid encountering the pair (particularly Karen, the elder sister), but I quickly changed my tune.

Forming a plan didn't mean that I had to follow it–I simply enjoy making them. Who knows, I might even head straight to Kanbaru's house when I was done shopping.

My personality aside, the fact of the matter was that above and beyond my desire for a thrill, things were bound to proceed much more quickly if I enlisted their aid. They had been my enemies last time and I had only been fearful of them, but in taking on a middle school girl, nothing would be more heartening than getting the sisters on my side.

I decided to sleep on it.

If I could just make sure they wouldn't tell Araragi, it might not be such a bad idea–but at this point it was no more than a pipe dream.

My preparations complete, I finally headed to the town–but not until I did something else first: change. Not just because I needed to keep warm. I had to disguise myself if I was going to set foot in that town, which is why I hadn't slicked back my hair. In fact, my usual "funeral suit," as Senjogahara called it, was close to a disguise.

Hawaiian-shirt me is not the real me, of course, but please don't think that the black suit is actually a part of me or something–or rather do, because that notion could be turned to my advantage in certain cases.

Clad in a brightly colored suit I had bought in the shopping district, I put on a necktie, like a normal office worker so to speak, and then, finally, got on the train and headed to that town.

A peaceful town, said to be under the sway of a serpent god at the moment.

Although I had told Senjogahara to expect it to take at least a month, I really prefer not to drag my feet.

Patience is important, of course, but I like to deal promptly with anything that can be dealt with promptly. I prize alacrity. So I decided to go straight to the heart of the matter.

And where was the heart of this particular matter?

On the one hand, there was Kita-Shirahebi Shrine–marching in there right off the bat, however, wouldn't just be reckless, it would be moronic. It wouldn't be fearless, just scary.

The matter had another heart, so I would go there first. It's odd to be speaking of multiple hearts, but never mind that, the other one in question was Nadeko Sengoku's home.

The logic being that if I could begin by getting a handle on the personality of the mark, the rest would fall into place–thus I left the station and made a beeline for the Sengoku place.

By which I mean I started walking in what I assumed to be its general direction, since I didn't have the address, and called Senjogahara.

"What is it? Any new developments?"

“I’ve completed my preparations and am now commencing operations… Sounds pretty loud where you are. Where’re you spending the holiday, anyway?”

I should’ve just butted out. The work was mine to do, and I didn’t want her butting in, so it didn’t matter where she was or what she was doing.

“Araragi’s house,” she answered. When she really didn’t have to. “They invited us, you see. My dad’s here too, like our families are getting to know each other…”

“Isn’t that cute.”

“Go easy on me. I’m quite aware how ridiculous it is for us to be carrying on like nothing’s wrong,” Senjogahara pleaded, in a sinking voice that was very unusual for her.

Well, that did explain the noise and her whispering. In that case, she could have just not taken the call, but with her and her sweetheart’s lives on the line, I guess she had no choice.

The thing is, while I found them ridiculous, I didn’t think they were wrong to be carrying on like that. Just because you’re dying in seventy-four, no, seventy-three days, whatever, in the near future, you can’t simply neglect your interpersonal obligations.

As long as you’re trying to save yourselves, anyway.

“I need Nadeko Sengoku’s address. By which I mean her legal place of residence, where she was living when she was human. I could find it out myself, but I want to know now,” I cut to the chase, not giving a damn about their complex feelings or delicate situations. “Email it to me, will you?”

“I know Miss Sengoku’s…Nadeko Sengoku’s address, sure, but…”

That “Miss” didn’t escape me–I had no idea what that slip of the tongue might mean, but I filed it away in my mind. I wasn’t sure if it would prove to be useful info, but I didn’t need to know yet.

“I don’t have your email,” Senjogahara stated.

“I’m telling you now. Do you have something to write with?”

“No, but I’ll remember it.”

Smart little girl.

It pissed me off, so I gave the address quickly and indistinctly. I don’t know what I’d have done if she’d gotten it wrong, but she repeated it back to me without any hassle.

She really is smart, I thought, genuinely impressed this time.

When such a smart girl ends up in a bad predicament, nothing to say but life ain’t fair–or wait. Maybe it just balances the equation when someone who’s talented faces hardship.

People who aren’t talented basically facing hardship too pokes a hole in that theory, but I’m just going to let that one go.

It was just a thought, after all, and I don’t have a comeback if you start splitting hairs.

“Okay, I’ll email her address right away… But what are you gonna do once you have it?”

“Send her a holiday card.”

Making jokes in serious circumstances isn’t just bluster, it’s a kind of conversation skill, but this one actually landed.

I could tell that Senjogahara had crouched down on the other end of the line–probably she couldn’t laugh out loud because her family or her sweetheart were on the other side of the door.

The stone-faced girl of two years ago.

She'd become someone who laughed easily–though in the end I was to blame for exacerbating the stone-faced attitude that had been brought on by her mysterious ailment.

"I'm kidding, of course," I clarified unnecessarily, which Senjogahara also seemed to find funny. She couldn't get a hold of herself, so there was nothing to do but forge ahead. "I'm going to find out more about Nadeko Sengoku. I assume that, having given up her humanity and become a god, she's currently being treated as a missing person, a runaway. So I'm going to get the story from her parents, then get permission to search her room. Maybe I'll find something."

"W-Wait a sec," Senjogahara tried to stop me though she still couldn't stop laughing. "Um… Kaiki. Naturally I'll leave your methods up to you, but don't get too rough–"

"I don't get rough. You should know me better than that. If you're going to leave my methods up to me, then leave them up to me. And don't forget, Senjogahara. Don't ever forget that your life was so shamefully dear to you that you turned to your most bitter enemy rather than lose it."

Sure, if it had only been a question of her own life, I doubt she would have come to me. But I enjoy saying stuff like that when I know the truth damn well. And the moment I enjoy it, I lose sight of what was so enjoyable about it.

"I know. I haven't forgotten. But let me ask you anyway… Please don't do anything too rough."

"I just told you I wouldn't."

Suddenly fed up, I jabbed the off button. I like phones because you can do that. Well, it wasn't just because I was fed up; if I kept Senjogahara away for too long, Araragi or one of his family members might notice.

And as I discovered later, both of his parents are cops… I really dodged a bullet there.

And then there was Senjogahara's dad.

Running into him was absolutely out of the question–even more out of the question than running into Koyomi Araragi.

Senjogahara's email arrived as I was cautioning myself. Man, high school girls have thumbs like lightning. She probably deleted it, too, before it even arrived in my inbox.

The subject line read, "Don't do anything rough." Persistent. Really persistent. She was making me sick. Now that she'd made me sick, I felt like honoring her request.

Frankly, I'd been planning to get a little rough at the Sengoku place, but I didn't want to anymore. Nicely done, Senjogahara.

I checked the address (Even allowing for the speed of her typing, the email arrived too soon for her to have looked it up, so she must've had it memorized. That gave me some insight not only into her prodigious memory, but also into how earnestly she had fought by her sweetheart's side these past few months. Not that I cared) and quickened my pace.

It occurred to me that I needed to add the house's location to my notebook when I got back to the hotel–at which point I realized that I didn't even know what Nadeko Sengoku looked like.

No need to panic, I could ask Senjogahara to send me a picture message at a later date–tonight, even. She probably had a pic of Nadeko Sengoku. Or I could just ask to borrow one from her parents when I got to their house.

The streets were oddly empty, which made me uneasy until I remembered that it was still the New Year's holiday. How quickly we

forget. What the hell was *I* doing during the holidays, anyway? My job–or maybe I was just trying to convince myself of that.

Nadeko Sengoku's parents were very average adults. What I mean by "very average adults" is that they were those law-abiding citizens I'm always going on about, no more, no less.

In other words, I felt neither positive nor negative about them–like with almost everyone I meet.

They were people, that's all.

Yet these average adults and law-abiding citizens weren't celebrating New Year's. Which was only natural since their daughter, while not dead, was missing, and had been for months. They were basically in mourning.

My joke about sending a greeting card was not only unfunny (even if Senjogahara had laughed) but also inappropriate.

But as someone who, hearing that word, only starts thinking about "appropriating" and what the prefix "in" would mean in that case, I'll send anyone a greeting card anytime I damn well please.

The atmosphere was so gloomy that my usual funeral suit (not my term) would have fit right in.

Anyway, I marched straight into the house of mourning. That makes it sound like I took the sort of "rough" approach Senjogahara worried I might, but in fact I was quite gentle.

It was by pressing the button on the intercom and announcing myself as the father of one of their daughter's (i.e. Nadeko Sengoku's) classmates, which is to say by lying, that I gained entry to the home.

"Maybe she just ran away, of course, but my daughter has been missing for three days now as well. I'm pretty sure she said something about your daughter right before she disappeared. It's

been tormenting me, so here I am, thoughtlessly barging in. Do you think you might be willing to talk to me about your daughter?"

And so on.

I'm one hell of a performer–or rather, any wariness her parents might have maintained towards their unknown visitor melted away the second I uttered their daughter's name, so even if I'd been a performer and liar unfit for anything above the level of an elementary school talent show, the outcome might have been the same.

If I may digress for a moment, nothing is more of an imposition, nor more painful, for people caught up in a situation like that than the busybody who comes bearing misinformation, or disinformation.

I understand that sentiment. I do, but that's as far as it goes.

So, as I sat in the living room listening to their story, I thought to myself, *You two are "very average adults"*–not to mention, *"very average parents."*

I'm not disparaging them, to be clear.

That was just my impression.

I meet a lot of people in my line of work. Among them have been a great many parents whose daughters have gone missing, whose daughters have died, whose daughters' whereabouts are known but who haven't been heard from in ages, and as far as I could tell the couple seemed, well, pretty normal.

I suppose that was to be expected.

No point in holding out for anything else.

Because while they might have been worried that she'd been in some accident, or even that she was dead, there was no way they suspected that their daughter had become a god.

It was inexcusable to let them tell their story without telling mine, so I began by describing how adorable, how sweet, and how close with Nadeko Sengoku my daughter had been.

As I said before, my visit was a serious imposition, but such blathering really hit home with Nadeko Sengoku's parents.

The things I never knew about my own girl, sobbed the mother. I might have been moved to tears by her weeping, if only my story were true.

I'd started talking off the cuff with no preparation or background info, and who knows, maybe I had uttered some truths, inadvertently. Given the possibility, I didn't feel guilty.

Not that I would have felt guilty without the possibility.

The fact that they believed my cock-and-bull story made it clear that, like so many other parents, the very average Sengokus didn't know a thing, not one damn thing, about their daughter.

While I seem to recall them talking about how she was shy, quiet, but prone to laughter, I had no interest in such parental cooing. What I wanted to hear about was her dark side, but they didn't seem to know, or want to know, about any of that.

Her father told me that she'd never had a rebellious phase and always listened to her parents, but a daughter who didn't go through any against her male parent? It should have set off every alarm bell in his brain. I almost stood up and demanded to know how he could have been so deaf.

Even Senjogahara, with her severe daddy issues, went through a distant phase with her father when she was in middle school.

Well, well, well.

But it was over and done with now, so no use crying over spilt milk. While I may have stumbled across the Sengoku family's

educational philosophy or whatever, it wouldn't have any bearing at all on my life thereafter, so without commenting on it, I simply said, "Oh really? Yes, our little girl was the same." I was just going with the flow of the conversation, and few can match Deishu Kaiki when it comes to that.

My cover story made it difficult to ask for a photo of their daughter, so I gave up on that idea, deciding to have Senjogahara send me one later on as I had originally envisioned. Instead I asked, "Would it be all right for me to see your daughter's bedroom?"

I didn't come right out with it like that, of course. I started with a little *I think my daughter may have lent something or other to Miss Nadeko, and I think it might provide some clue to finding the two of them, does anything come to mind?* It was only after dancing around the issue for a half-hour or so that I arrived at the goal. Naturally I didn't neglect an initial *I know this is terribly impolite, but.* I don't think Mr. and Mrs. Sengoku thought I was being impolite in the slightest, however.

Nadeko Sengoku's parents showed me to her (second-floor) room, which was what you might call tidy. Yet it was a little too clean, artificially so, to call it ordered. Her parents must have continued to clean the room after its occupant went missing. When I noticed this, I asked them, and indeed they were preserving it in the state it had been in before their daughter disappeared.

Well, Nadeko Sengoku wasn't dead (as far as they were concerned) but only missing, so as parents it was the right thing to do. It wasn't like they were counting the years of a child who'd passed away.

Kid-friendly manga lined up on the bookshelf, cute stuffed animals–the overall impression was very much that of a middle school girl's room.

But to me it somehow seemed affected.

Affected, if this is how it looked with her parents cleaning it–honestly, I might even say creepy.

It was as if a cute, childlike sensibility was being forced on the room willy-nilly, which, combined with her father's remark that Nadeko Sengoku had never had a rebellious phase, gave me plenty to think about.

I couldn't very well snort that it didn't matter.

This–did matter.

It might be the key.

The darkness, in Nadeko Sengoku's heart.

With that in mind, I began scouring her room–it was still bright outside, but the interior was dim because the curtains were drawn. The first thing I did upon entering, therefore, was open them.

Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Sengoku hadn't gone back down to the living room after showing me to their daughter's room, so I had to conduct my search under their watchful gaze and couldn't ransack the place.

I was sweeping a square room in circles, so to speak, or just scratching the surface–and then, on the lowest shelf of the bookshelf, I happened on the spine of something that appeared to be a photo album. A photo album. Excellent, what a windfall. After securing her parents' permission, I opened it.

The pages were filled with portraits of Nadeko Sengoku. *So this is Nadeko Sengoku, eh?* A face to put to the name. At long last, my mark had a face.

My first impression of her–though these were only photos–matched my impression of the room.

Childlike, cute, creepy.

Somehow artificial. Like she'd been compelled to be pretty–with something awkward about her smile. As if she were only smiling because a camera lens was pointed at her, and she had no choice.

It was more abject than shy.

She had her bangs down, to avoid meeting anyone's gaze–or worse, like she was cowering.

What was she so afraid of?

What?

Taking them with me was definitely off the table, so I burned the image into my brain as best I could, to be analyzed in due course.

"She's alone in all these pictures, isn't she? I guess she didn't take any with my daughter," I observed, casually so it wouldn't sound like an excuse, before returning the album to the shelf. I was just filling the time in a sense with those words, but after I spoke them I realized that I hadn't come across a single photo of the whole family.

In other words, there were no photos of Nadeko Sengoku and her parents, only those of Nadeko Sengoku by herself.

Sure, they require someone to take them, so I could understand why there might not be a lot of pictures of the three of them together… But there should have at least been some of her with her mother or her with her father. Even if this was Nadeko Sengoku's personal album, no, precisely because it was her personal album, there was no need for such a strict line to be drawn.

I had intended to postpone my analysis but ended up thinking about it anyway–what the hell was going on in the mind of a girl who kept in her room a modeling portfolio of an album, devoid of family photos?

I looked over my shoulder, but the Sengokus didn't seem furtive or defensive in the face of someone who'd seen it.

As if there wasn't a single thing about it to be ashamed of–in fact, like they were proud, even under the circumstances, that their daughter was so adorable.

Good, law-abiding citizens indeed.

They believed wholeheartedly in their decency.

Even with their daughter missing–they probably thought they'd made no mistakes in life. They were probably proud of that fact.

Why is he staring at us? they seemed to be wondering, a bit suspiciously perhaps, so I covered for myself with a little calculated flattery: "I can really see both of you in your daughter." Speaking as a professional swindler, it was a bit blatant, but it seemed to do the trick. While their mood didn't openly improve, they appeared relaxed for parents whose daughter's room was being scoured.

I continued my search, and just when I was starting to think, *I'd better decide what this important item was that my daughter lent her,* I reached for a closet that had been fitted to the corner of the room.

Well, I began to reach for it, to be precise–I'd left it until last, but Mrs. Sengoku raised her voice for the first time: "Ahhh, please don't touch that closet."

Her steadfast conviction, manifest in her tone, would clearly require a great expenditure of effort to overturn.

I asked the perfectly natural question, "Why not?" and naturally expected an important reason. But all her mother said was that they'd been told not to touch the closet.

Told? By whom? I probably didn't need to ask but did so anyway, and just as I thought, their daughter had told them.

It’s hard to describe how I felt then, so let me simply state the facts.

In short, their daughter was missing, and even though they might find an important clue, her parents, devoted to keeping her room clean and just the way it was, humored Nadeko Sengoku and never opened the closet.

It would be difficult, in my ostensible role as her friend’s dad, to persuade them to let me open the closet, and downright impossible to search it behind not one but both of their backs, so I put it off until later.

Well, I knew about it now.

I’d learned of its existence.

That alone made the visit to the Sengoku home worthwhile–I gave her parents my cell phone number, took down theirs, told them I’d contact them if I discovered anything and that we should stay in touch, and left.

Setting aside the closet (even if I opened it, the punch line might be nothing more than a bunch of naughty books lined up inside as you’d expect of a middle schooler), I had managed to learn from my light dredging of her room that Nadeko Sengoku did indeed appear to have a dark side.

I might be the only sourpuss in the whole world sour enough to find darkness amidst that strawberry-colored room, though. I imagine I am. Or maybe I’m just assuming that anyone who becomes a god through a mysterious ailment must have a dark side.

Apparently I’d spent more time than I intended laying the groundwork to win her parents’ trust, because when I left the place it was already what you could reasonably call evening.

I thought it wasn’t too soon and called Senjogahara.

“I didn’t do anything rough,” I sarcastically opened with her own plea, then continued, “Now send me a picture of Nadeko Sengoku.”

“What, you didn’t even know what she looks like?”

I surmised that the New Year’s celebration had come to an end since she didn’t lower her voice at all for this barbed reply.

“I’ve never met the girl,” I said. “You’ve been insisting she’s my indirect victim, that’s all. Upon reflection, I can’t even be sure that’s true.”

“Are you telling me I’m deceiving you?” She probably didn’t want to hear that from me. She sounded mortified.

“I looked at a photo album at her house. Cute kid, isn’t she. The kind you’d hate.”

“…” There was a long pause in response to my renewed sarcasm, after which she admitted, “Yeah.” So honest–definitely no way she could deceive me. “The type I hate the most. Even if things were different, we could never, ever be friends.”

“I haven’t figured out yet if they baby her or if she just acts like a baby, though. Did you have her address because you’ve been to her house? By which I mean, have you spoken with her parents?”

“Of course I have… One of Araragi’s sisters was friends with Nadeko Sengoku, so I do know them, just barely. Then again, Araragi’s sister could befriend anyone, so that doesn’t mean they were particularly close.”

Hmmm, Koyomi Araragi’s sister… Karen, or Tsukihi? Given their characters, Tsukihi seemed like the more logical choice.

“Are Araragi’s sisters–aware?” I asked. “Of their brother’s situation? Based on the New Year’s festivities, it seems like their folks, at least, are in the dark…”

“His sisters don’t know either. Not their brother’s situation, nor what’s happened to Nadeko Sengoku. The only ones who know are me, Araragi, Shinobu Oshino, and Miss Hanekawa. I actually wanted to keep it secret from her as well… But the cat’s out of the bag.”

Why would Senjogahara add that playfully? Who *was* this Hanekawa, anyway?

“That’s only as I understand it, of course. Maybe Araragi spoke to someone and is keeping it secret from me.”

“Hmm.”

That seemed entirely possible. A real-life watch-fob-and-comb couple, they did seem to keep a lot of secrets from each other. I’m pretty sure I’d heard something about how they promised not to hide anything where aberrations were concerned, but who knows, maybe that promise was riddled with loopholes.

If Araragi were to seek help without telling Senjogahara, who would he go to? I thought about it, but nothing came to me.

I didn’t have a good notion of the width of his social circle–if I had to guess, maybe Kagenui or Ononoki? Those two immortal-slayers seemed to have reconciled their differences with him, boringly enough…

“Why are you playing this so close to the vest? If you went public, you might find an unexpected solution,” I threw in, though I kind of saw what the answer would be. Enlisting Kanbaru, whose left arm seems to have been taken over by an aberration, was an option, for example–it wouldn’t be particularly desirable from my perspective, but as far as I knew, the quota of wishes available from that Monkey’s Paw had yet to be used up.

“Well…she’s just savage. Nadeko Sengoku is.”

Savage, Senjogahara had said, choosing her words. The acid-tongued (at least in my experience) young lady resorting to such a straightforward expression was unexpected.

Savage.

The word wasn't applied to humans as often as you might think. You used it to describe a beast–or a small child.

Not how one typically describes middle schoolers, anyway, nor gods for that matter.

Not typically, and yet.

"It's as if she wouldn't hesitate to lump in and get rid of anyone we might ask for help… Originally this is just an issue between her and Araragi, but she has no qualms about dragging other people into it, me included."

"…"

Even I wasn't so uncouth as to complain, *Hold on, doesn't that mean that my life is in danger? You were perfectly happy to drag me into it though I might die?*

I'd known all along.

I'd taken the job fully aware and cognizant of the underlying circumstances. Every job carries some risk, and ultimately work is about balancing the risks and benefits.

But what the hell were the benefits of this job? Over half of my 100,000-yen expense account had already gone to clothing costs.

"I see, so you can't speak to just anyone."

That's why she'd wanted to exclude this Hanekawa–who was clearly no ordinary person, if she so easily sussed out a life-or-death secret Senjogahara and Araragi were trying to keep.

It was the Fire Sisters and Koyomi Araragi, along with Hitagi Senjogahara, who uprooted the con I planted in the town six months earlier, but–and this is an educated guess, or more like speculation–maybe this Hanekawa actually helped out with the weeding as well.

"Hang on, Kaiki. Don't misunderstand me, I came to you because–"

"Doesn't matter. I don't mind at all, so skip the annoying excuses. I'm a pro, I put my life on the line every day." A little too cool for its own good–no need to impress Senjogahara now, this wasn't two years ago. "What matters is that I got a glimpse into Nadeko Sengoku's domestic circumstances… But Senjogahara, what did you really think of her?"

"Weren't you uninterested in my views?"

"As a point of entry, no, but otherwise it's fine. Think of this as a chat, not a formal briefing. *The type you hate, savage,* you said, but well, I want to hear some anecdotes to go along with your general impressions."

"…"

"Hm? What's the matter?"

"The fact is…I've never actually met Nadeko Sengoku."

"Huh? Are you serious?"

Now this was a surprise.

Nadeko Sengoku wanted to kill someone whose face she'd never seen?

"Yes. We made a deal, or…had a conversation over the phone once, but even that was after she was no longer human."

“I see. I think I’m starting to get the picture. Of the insane situation you’re in–I’m surprised you’ve maintained your sanity.”

“Me too.”

“Except, if you’re coming to me for help, maybe you’ve actually lost your mind,” I said, turning my gaze towards the setting sun. Dusk, the hour of fey encounters.

“Kaiki, listen to me–”

“For the time being, I think I’ll go see Nadeko Sengoku. I can find her at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, right?”

“Not necessarily. At least, I haven’t met her since she became a god, either–she must hate me that much. Araragi finds her there about one in five times…and nearly gets killed whenever he does.”

She could kill him any time she pleases, but I guess she’s letting him live until the appointed day, Senjogahara added unsettlingly.

The fighting continued, then.

A lengthy campaign for sure.

“He won’t be there today, will he? I have no interest in running into him at the shrine.”

“Nope. Tonight, he and I–never mind,” Senjogahara cut herself off.

My, my, how sweet.

It seemed that even as the battle unfolded, so did their love affair–I suppose passions escalate when your life is in constant danger. I’ve never been in that situation so I can’t say for certain, though…

“Well, if I don’t find her, then so be it. Can’t make any headway until I’ve seen the place for myself.”

“If you do meet her, what will you do? Do you have the material to carry out a con?”

“Not at all. I’m just going to drop in, pay my respects–and who knows, maybe the whole thing can be resolved with a little chat.”

“Yeah… I doubt that’s about to happen, but go for it.”

What a low-key pep talk.

I wasn’t encouraged, or anything else.

People like to throw around the term “power spot,” but naturally I don’t lend it much credence. In that vein, however, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine would be a “negative power spot.”

Negative power. Damn, that sounds fishy.

Oshino called it a “hangout for aberrations”–as well as an “air pocket.” Those descriptions, apt and to the point, are very him, but if you ask me it’s just a plain old hilltop.

Such a place being damp, dark, and uncomfortable was par for the course. I’d intended to visit the shrine on a number of occasions last time I was in town, but for various reasons never got around to it.

I had heard about it beforehand, and according to those stories it was nothing more than a crumbling ruin–but when I got there (after trudging up the mountain in the snow and almost giving up more than once), a splendid main hall that looked brand-new greeted me.

Not just looked, I was pretty sure it was brand-new. It had the feel of fresh construction–could it possibly have appeared in the ruins thanks to the wondrous divine power of a newly manifested serpent god?

No, that was a ridiculous thought, it was probably just the fruit of some bureaucratic process–construction plans that had been made a

long time ago had only now been put into action. Nothing to do with Nadeko Sengoku.

Oddly, though, the imposing presence of a small but tidy main hall in the dead center of the grounds seemed to lend the mountain itself a brisk air.

Like the dampness had been swept away.

I walked down the path to the hall.

They say you're supposed to stay to the side because the center is where the gods tread, but what do I care.

There ain't no path I can't walk, ain't no mountain I can't climb.

In fact, if my sacrilegious attitude sent the god here into such a rage that she appeared before me, that would be to my benefit, but sadly, no such luck. People wouldn't appreciate deities who popped up so readily.

I arrived at the offertory box.

I didn't sense anyone inside the hall–maybe this should go without saying, but it seemed unmanned. The shrine may have been rebuilt, but it hadn't openly revived as an object of worship, and a quick survey of the scene showed no sign that anyone had come for a New Year's visit.

Being in snow country comes in handy in these instances: you can determine the recent turnout from how the snow is piled and any footprints, or lack thereof.

There seemed to be no question that I was the first person to visit the shrine since the beginning of the new year.

In other words, the main hall at Kita-Shirahebi was new, but that was it–nothing else had been restored. Some head priest probably looked after the shrine, of course, but was hardly putting it to active use. Then again, who knew what the future held?

To put it another way, if this shrine ended up bustling with people on New Year's Day, Nadeko Sengoku's divine powers would be further enhanced, until no one could stop her–if anything was to be done, it had to be done before then. Well, maybe it was already too late, and no one could stop her. And if things continued the way they were, Araragi and Senjogahara, at least, wouldn't live to see next year.

Anyway, I'd do what was mine to do.

Whatever's mine to do, to make life easier for myself.

I took some change from the pocket of my suit, thought better of it, pulled a 10,000-yen bill from the other pocket, and placed it in the offertory box.

Bow twice clap twice bow once.

I wasn't sure if that was right, but I went through the worshipping motions as I recalled them–how many years had it been since I last made them? As a minimal act of recalcitrance, I had slipped the 10,000-yen note into the box as deliberately as possible instead of tossing it, and to judge from my awkwardness, this may have been Deishu Kaiki's first-ever New Year's shrine visit.

As my worship came to an end–

"Here's Nadeko!"

Racing out from inside the main hall, the deity manifested just like that.

Appreciate, no.

But I had a favorable impression because a 10,000-yen bill had drawn her out–even if her jubilant look evoked not so much a god pleased by almsgiving as a child exulting over a New Year's cash gift.

"Nadeko got to become a god, but no one came to the shrine over the holiday. Bor-ring. Let's chat, gramps," Nadeko Sengoku said,

all hyped up and strangely cheery. She seemed quite pleased with herself as she held the 10,000-yen note she had removed from the offertory box.

Her method of retrieval, however, had been to reach out with the fearsome white snakes that had replaced every last hair on her head, so it wasn't exactly heartwarming.

In fact it was terrifying.

A mass of writhing snakes replacing your hair definitely qualifies as a mysterious ailment.

Decidedly inexplicable by modern medicine.

They say humans have around a hundred thousand strands of hair on their heads, but apparently Nadeko Sengoku was above average in that regard because there had to be more than that many snakes swarming around her noggin.

Even Medusa might be turned to stone if she saw Nadeko Sengoku–and judging from the effortless way she plucked the 10,000-yen note from the offertory box, she could see through the eyes of every one of those snakes.

In which case.

How did the world appear to her?

She would have over one hundred thousand viewpoints.

On the other hand, the hair was pretty much it in terms of seeming like a serpent god (though that was plenty, what more could you ask for). Her clothes, for instance, were pretty normal.

Normal, except for the fact that it was the middle of winter.

The fact that there was snow everywhere in the middle of winter.

Her sleeveless white dress felt cold just to look at, she seemed ready to melt into the snow–ephemeral, vanishing. If only she had been wearing something a little more ophidian, at least.

She was also barefoot despite the snow.

What was the deal with her look?

She certainly didn't come across as a god–and was that a scrunchy around her left wrist? Also white. Did she really tie back that serpentine mane with a scrunchy?

I realized belatedly that the words for "god" and "hair" are homophonous in our language: *kami.* Metamorphing monsters do love their puns.

There are various schools of thought as to whether gods should actually be included in that category at all, but if you ask me, there's really not much difference insofar as they're all on the take.

"Ten thousand yen. Ten thousand yen!"

She seemed pleased.

She probably was pleased.

But now that she was a god, what use did she have for money? And anyway, it was for the shrine's upkeep and not meant to be pocketed.

Maybe it wasn't the amount, and she was just excited about receiving her first offering. That would be nothing less than an insult to money, however, and would leave me no choice but to revise my earlier favorable impression.

"Thanks so much, gramps!"

Nadeko Sengoku finally turned to face me, with a carefree laugh totally unlike what I'd expected based on her parents' description–it didn't seem at all like that of a shy or bashful person.

They'd told me she laughed easily, but I was pretty sure she hadn't in this way.

It was as if she'd been unchained. She was constrained by nothing and no one, by neither man nor monster.

"You're Nadeko's very first believer, gramps!"

"…"

Innocent or not, this was inexcusable. I won't deny that I thought about spanking her, but not being a violent man, I just said, "Stop calling me 'gramps.' My name is Deishu Kaiki," and left it at that. What a nice guy.

Well, I meant to leave it at that, but I'd blown it–Nadeko Sengoku was an indirect victim of the con I had pulled in this town. It wouldn't be surprising if she'd heard my name somewhere–from Araragi or the Fire Sisters, for instance.

It wouldn't be surprising if she knew my name.

In which case, it was not out of the question for this girl (who had mercilessly announced her intent to murder Araragi and Senjogahara, who had next to nothing to do with it) to fly into a rage–or so I thought.

But she cried out, "Mister Kaiki!" with a delighted look. "Mister Kaiki, Mister Deishu Kaiki! What a weird name! Nice to meetcha! Sorry for calling you 'gramps'! Yeah, you're definitely much too young for that! Wow, so young! Younger than Nadeko, maybe! Better call you 'young master' instead!"

"…"

What to make of this? Obviously, what I should make of it was that, as an indirect victim, she'd never learned my name. Yet I had a hard time believing that.

She must have heard it, must have known it.

But–she simply didn't remember.

It wasn't because she didn't give a shit about me or because the events of her human existence were trivial now that she was a god–she seemed to have forgotten.

She'd forgotten the root of all evil that had driven her here.

That's what I figured. She forgets the unforgettable like it's nothing–and clings instead to passing memories like her friend's older brother being nice to her when she was little.

In other words–her notion of what was important and what wasn't had gotten screwed up.

It might seem hasty, or even dangerous, to jump to such conclusions just because she had forgotten my name, but I know them.

I know so many people like her. I don't want to, but I do.

So many people who can't tell what's dear from what's not, what's valuable from what's not, what's important from what's not, and who thus constantly mistake one for the other. The kind of people who can't handle their own lives–without exception, they've been backed into an emotional corner. People who are somehow broken, you might say.

Senjogahara's mother, for instance.

I don't know if Nadeko Sengoku's mind had already been like that when she was human, or if it was only after she became a god, but either way it was beyond repair–even without any prodding, she happily volunteered, "Nadeko can't wait for it to be March! Wanna know why? Should I tell you? It's because around then, it'll be time to kill the person Nadeko loves!"

I guess she was so happy to have someone to talk to that she was thoughtfully offering up, on the house, her single hottest, most interesting topic.

I guess. But the sight of a girl saying it nonchalantly as if it were no big deal was totally bizarre. This is me talking here, so you know how bizarre. I also suspected I might be the only one in the world who'd cast it in those terms, though.

"They asked Nadeko to wait six months so she's waiting, thinking being a god means listening to people's requests. Yeah, Nadeko figured six months would go by in a snap because gods live a really long time, but it's no different. A day is a day, six months is six months. Recently it's been really hard waiting that long, but it's okay, it's okay. Gods have to keep their promises!"

"Right… It's really important to keep your promises. You might even call it sublime," I agreed, not meaning it at all, just to keep the conversation going. I was definitely afraid that one wrong word might set her off, but I probably would have said the same thing even without that concern.

I was feeling terribly sorry for her and couldn't bring myself to contradict her–you can believe that. I hate to be seen in such a high-minded, hypocritical light, but just this once, it was true.

I felt sorry for a ridiculous middle-school deity who was so delighted by a visitor, or should I say a worshipper, that she wanted to please and entertain with her chatter.

I had to sympathize with her.

This is me we're talking about, so of course that didn't change anything–I wasn't about to throw Senjogahara's job out the window and give up on hoodwinking this girl. Nor did I consider doing anything to help her.

A job's a job.

Still, what was bothering me was the discrepancy–between what I'd heard about Nadeko Sengoku up to that point, and what I was experiencing. She was supposed to be the very picture of a timid little girl, not someone who could "entertain" people even if they were her worshippers or faithful.

Why was the girl so cheerful and sociable, as if she'd been unchained, unbound?

It was a no-brainer.

She *had* been unchained, unbound.

Senjogahara made it seem like I was the big bad wolf, but Nadeko Sengoku, at least, had ended up happy thanks to my con.

Very, very happy.

"But it's weird. Why hasn't anyone shown up? The shrine's all redone and everything, and Nadeko figured lots of people would come."

"Maybe there wasn't enough publicity?" I suggested. I have a thing or two to say about business–in its illegal forms anyway. "Or maybe the service isn't cutting it?"

"Service? You mean like sexy stuff?"

"…"

For the first time, I ignored one of her guileless questions. I was neither nice enough nor possessed of sufficient communication skills to play along with the minor-league dirty jokes of a middle schooler.

Who knows how she took my silence, though, because she continued, "Big Brother Koyomi was super happy when Nadeko was topless and wearing gym shorts!"

What the hell had that guy been getting up to? Was he a criminal, or what?

In a rare moment of righteous indignation, I thought about writing Araragi's salvation out of my plan for duping Nadeko Sengoku, but I guess that wouldn't fly.

"Also, he really seemed to enjoy watching Nadeko writhe in a swimsuit here at the shrine! Since Big Brother Koyomi looked happy, Nadeko was happy too!"

"Um, listen…you." I wasn't sure how to address someone who'd become a god, but treating her like a buddy didn't seem right, so I went with *you.* "This…Big Brother Koyomi? I don't know if Koyomi is his first name or his last name, but–" I pretended not to know who he was (it would be problematic if I did, but I also wanted to be a complete stranger to a guy who made middle school girls do such things) and asked, "You really like this Big Brother Koyomi, huh?"

Even though I was the one who'd asked it, the question set my teeth on edge.

"Yup! Nadeko loves him! That's why Nadeko's going to kill him! Murder him!"

"I see…"

"And his girlfriend, what's-her-name, and his little girl slave so-and-so too!"

She talked about it quite happily. She spoke about killing her crush and his associates in a couple of months as happily as you might about an upcoming date with your sweetheart, or even more joyfully. And she wasn't bragging, she was telling this story to entertain me, in the spirit of good service. Like she didn't doubt I'd get as much pleasure out of it as she did.

It was ironic that a god believed in such balderdash–or ironic even without that aspect.

Plain old ironic, anyway you sliced it.

Not to mention, she didn't even remember the names of Senjogahara and Shinobu Oshino, who were also on her hit list–the steps, connections, and reasoning were all mixed up.

And then I realized. That is, I came to a conclusion.

The girl was a fool.

She was stupid.

Irredeemably lacking in the brains department–and everyone had overlooked it all along. Everyone around her, and not just her parents, had babied her.

Koyomi Araragi–was likely no exception.

He had babied Nadeko Sengoku.

And she just let herself be spoiled.

I am by no means trying to deny my own culpability, but I think that's why she ended up this way, a god.

I imagine any eccentricities she had, like always wearing a hat, or hiding her face behind bangs, or not being able to meet people's eyes, had been overlooked, explained away, as cute or adorable.

All her problem behaviors–"forgiven."

And this was the result.

Which only deepened my sympathy.

For precisely that reason, now that she'd been liberated from that environment, Nadeko Sengoku would absolutely refuse to "become human again" even if she was given the chance, I speculated.

It was pointless to speculate, though, so I asked her directly, "Listen, Your Godliness. If you could go back to being human, would you want to?"

“Nope,” came her decisive answer. Just as I expected. A kind of pre-established harmony?

“Even if becoming human again means you can be sweethearts with Big Brother Koyomi?”

“Yeah,” came her decisive answer. This was unexpected. Pre-established disharmony. The same answer even with the conditions altered. I had thought she’d waver or at least think about it for a second.

“Nadeko’s okay now with an unrequited love.”

“…”

“If your unrequited love can go on forever–that’s better than a requited love, don’t you think, Mister Kaiki?”

“Sure,” I nodded, for the sake of agreeing with her, but the fact is that I put more oomph into it than necessary.

Unrequited love. I’m not made of stone, and I’m old enough to have had some experiences of my own on that score. What’s more, maybe that unrequited love is still going strong–given that the woman in question died in a car accident.

With a dead person, unrequited love is the only option. It goes on forever, without end, regardless of what other loves you might know thereafter.

You missed out on the heartbreak.

In that sense, maybe Nadeko Sengoku’s notion wasn’t all that bankrupt–if she killed Koyomi Araragi, she could immerse herself forevermore in a happy, unrequited love.

Ignorant of heartbreak.

“Big Brother Koyomi has come to this shrine a bunch of times, hasn’t he? You don’t count him as a worshipper…a visitor?”

“Nope, because he just talks nonsense. It’s confusing so Nadeko shoos him away. Telling him he’s not getting killed until March, he can come back then. He’s so persistent, Nadeko’s started pretending not to be here.”

“And nobody else pays you a visit? Other than me and Big Brother Koyomi, no one has come here?”

“Well, there were the workmen.”

“Workmen?”

For a moment I couldn’t figure out what she was talking about, but I quickly realized she meant the carpenters who had restored the main shrine hall. I wondered where this girl was while the place was under construction. Somewhere, I suppose. Excitedly watching from the trees as they built her new home, perhaps. Hardly expecting to be neglected once they were done.

How very lonely.

The shrine hadn’t been left alone to rot–but it was still a lonely place.

“They rebuilt it so-o-o fast! Is that what they call a rush job?? They were real pros! Nadeko couldn’t believe it! And at first some people did come, but they all ran away when Nadeko appeared. How come? You’re the first one not to, Mister Kaiki, and the first one to put money in the box!”

So thank you! she said, looking ready to hug me–and wary of her embrace, I shifted my position slightly.

“If everyone runs away when they see you,” I began.

Maybe there was no need, but in addition to lies and falsehoods, another of my mouth’s specialties is voicing unwelcome truths that don’t have to be, or shouldn’t be, voiced. Which is why it’s the Mouth of Half-Truth. Always mixing them together.

“It must have something to do with your unsettling appearance. That hair is terrifying.”

“…”

She looked flabbergasted.

Her smile disappeared. *Ah, maybe I’m dead,* I guessed. I would put up a fight, of course, but totally unprepared as I was, my hopes of victory seemed faint. It wasn’t such a bad place to die, though, and meeting my end because of my big mouth would be fitting.

No, I’m not that stouthearted. What really went through my head: *This sucks. I shouldn’t have taken this job after all, what was I thinking, if this is Senjogahara’s revenge against me, full success, she got me*–yet my train of thought only made it that far.

Not because thousands of snakes sank their fangs into me and lethal poison flooded my veins right then–as I watched, Nadeko Sengoku’s startled face became neutral and then brightened into a happy smile.

It wasn’t that her previous smile returned to her face. The open, carefree smile she had worn before had seemed, in its own way, neither forced nor insincere, but it had still somehow felt like the “professional smile” of a god. This one, however, was different. She seemed genuinely happy.

“Unsettling? Terrifying?” she said. “No one’s ever called Nadeko that before.”

“…”

I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why that would make her happy, but then she continued, “Nobody ever says anything but *Nadeko’s so cute.*”

Finally I started to understand.

A one-percent glimmer of comprehension.

Maybe a tenth of a percent.

Being called cute wasn't a compliment to this girl anymore, it no longer made her happy. In fact, the word must have limited her in many ways. An insult, or badmouthing her, looped around to become a compliment–a blatant example of how her value system was all screwed up.

In that case.

In that case, continuing to be a god, a mountain god whose visuals might make even Medusa turn pale, definitely suited her better than becoming human again.

The thought gave me a heavy heart, but then I realized that, even if it were so, it had nothing to do with me. I gave that heavy heart the heave-ho and felt as light as ever. It wasn't my job to rescue this poor, pitiful middle school girl.

In fact, it was my job to deceive her–and that was something I could do without an ounce of guilt.

Naturally, Nadeko Sengoku's parents and friends had to be hoping that she would return to town (as a human being), but that wasn't my business. If they wanted me to make that happen, maybe I would, but not without due compensation.

Anyway, I had gotten a taste of Nadeko Sengoku's personality, probably enough to give me heartburn. Since she was a god, "personality" wasn't exactly the right word, but it didn't seem wrong applied to an all-too-human serpent deity.

"Wow. So Nadeko is terrifying and unsettling. Do you think it'd be better for Nadeko's image if the snakes were tied back with a scrunchy?"

I responded by informing her that it was getting late and that I had to start heading home.

“No-o-o-o!! Talk with Nadeko some more, Mister Kaiki! If you leave Nadeko’ll be SO LONELY!”

Thinking to myself how annoying a god throwing a tantrum was, I felt around in my pocket. And what I found there was a loop of string. Simply put, it was a cat’s cradle.

Cat’s cradle is a hobby of mine, and I always keep one concealed in my pocket–yeah right. The string was from one of the packages I’d acquired out shopping that morning, and my idle hands had toyed with it on the way, that’s all.

I handed the string to Nadeko Sengoku.

“If you’ve got some time to kill, play with this.”

“What is it? Wait, a cat’s cradle?”

“Oh, you know about it.”

I thought kids these days weren’t familiar with such pastimes.

I’d been meaning to smugly explain to her what it was, my mistake.

“Yeah. Nobita likes it, right? His specialties are cat’s cradle, nodding off, and the quick draw.”

Superb.

Even if cat’s cradle is out of fashion, *Doraemon* culture endures. In this age of upheaval when Deputy Manager Tomii is promoted to manager and Ryo the cop gives up gambling, the constancy of *Doraemon* is like a salve.

Though she might not recognize Nobuyo Oyama’s voice.

“Nadeko doesn’t actually know how to do cat’s cradle, though…”

“I’ll teach you a few techniques. When you’ve mastered those, I’ll come back.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’ve never lied.”

I honestly said that.

I went on with the black-hearted whitewashing.

“After all, I’m your very first believer.”

I’m probably going to hell. Not that I give a damn.

Nadeko Sengoku innocently waved goodbye as I left and headed for the station, from where I rode the train back to the shopping district, returned to my room at the business hotel, and collapsed onto the bed. *Tiiimberrr,* you might say. Climbing the mountain had been a lot of work, of course, but going shopping and searching the Sengoku home had also provided their own sorts of exercise, so I was exhausted.

Phew. It’d been a long time since I took on such a hectic job. Maybe I was being a little impatient… Not sure why I was holding a one-man activities review board immediately upon returning to the hotel, but there’d been no need to visit the Sengoku place and Kita-Shirahebi Shrine on the same day.

Was I over-extending myself?

Was I excited about this job I’d gotten from Senjogahara?

I hated the very thought.

I hated it, but I had it anyway, which pissed me off, so I called her to improve my mood.

It was basically a prank call.

“What do you want, Kaiki…at this time of night?”

She didn't even try to disguise the fact that she had been asleep. She was probably at her own home, but since she said my name out loud, I assumed her father wasn't sleeping nearby.

Maybe her elite businessman dad had gone back to work right after New Year's Day. He probably still had some debts to pay off, after all.

"This doesn't qualify for 'at this time of night.' The trains are still running."

"I don't know where you're from, but in the boonies we go to bed early."

"I see."

Then was her previously-hinted-at rendezvous with Araragi over?

Incidentally, even I'm not sure where I'm from. I was definitely raised in Kyushu, but I tend to forget about the past.

It's not a problem that I do, either.

"I'm reporting back about the job."

"I know I said something about staying in touch, but I meant that I would contact you."

"Oh, really? I misunderstood you. Well, can you pop over here while the trains are still running?"

"Huh?"

"There's something I want to talk to you about, in person. As soon as possible."

"…"

Senjogahara lapsed into sullen silence for a while, but finally said, *Okay.*

How tough was she, anyway? And she was only a high school girl. I'd been expecting her to hang up on me, angrily. Nor would I have abandoned the job if she had.

"I'll do whatever you say," she insisted. "I'm your dog, at least for the next two-and-a-half months."

"Hahaha, glad to hear it. I'm staying at…"

I gave the station, but not the hotel.

It wasn't that kind of hotel, but a grown man inviting a high school girl up to his single room wouldn't do. Times being what they are and all.

I told her I'd meet her at the station.

Even the boonies usually had an all-night diner downtown–as an adult, I would have preferred an *izakaya,* somewhere I could get a drink, but that was also dicey with a high schooler in tow.

"Hmph," grunted Senjogahara. "Listen, Kaiki. There's something I want to ask you. How does it feel, as a middle-aged man, to have a high school girl at your beck and call?"

"Good question. An uppity brat bowing down before her betters certainly does me no harm."

"Drop dead."

I'd been told to drop dead. What happened to bowing down?

But hanging up, I muttered to myself, "What are you doing?" I was shocked at myself. Appalled by my own behavior.

I saw myself objectively, then, as a petty person tormenting a child who'd made herself vulnerable to me, and I felt so low that I might sink right into the bed–yeah right. Senjogahara had sold me down various rivers, so this was nothing but a serves-you-right.

Still, it's true that I was appalled.

I had just regretted overdoing it from the start, or at least taking on too much for one day, so why was I giving myself more work? And even if Senjogahara could come, how would she get home? The trains would stop running while I was bringing her up to date.

If that happened, she'd have to take a taxi… She probably didn't have any money, so I'd have to pay the fare, and I couldn't rightly include that expenditure in my expenses.

It didn't make any sense, it was akin to profligacy–well, I have nothing against spending sprees, and seeing it in that light made me less upset.

Having added another item of business to attend to, though, despite the fact that all I wanted to do was shower, eat a meal alone, and have a nice long sleep, I really had to ask myself what the hell I was thinking.

Talk about a workaholic.

I considered blowing it off, but I couldn't leave Senjogahara there alone at the station in the middle of the night.

Sighing deeply, I left the hotel.

When I arrived, she was planted in front of the ticket gate like one of the vajra kings, her expression unhappy and unwilling in the extreme.

It was so intense that I didn't even want to speak to her.

More intense than 3D.

At any rate, an expressive face is a wonderful thing.

"Evening, Kaiki. I didn't recognize you for a second, with your hair down like that. And those clothes make you look almost decent," she said as soon as she noticed me. I assumed it was meant to be sarcastic, but if my "disguise" worked on her, then I could stop

worrying for the moment about being beaten up by a mob of middle schoolers.

“Look who’s talking. What are you doing wearing your school uniform in the middle of the night?”

Senjogahara was wearing a coat over her uniform. With the addition of a knit cap, scarf, and gloves, her protection against the cold was complete. In many ways, she seemed more grown up than she had two years ago, but the way a puffy coat looked oddly becoming on her hadn’t changed.

“I want to show you as little as is humanly possible of my personal fashion. I’m wearing my uniform to emphasize the fact that we’re meeting in a strictly professional capacity.”

“Huh.”

Come to think of it, she’d also been wearing her uniform the day before. I had somehow taken for granted that a high school student would wear one, but actually, it was absurdly out of whack for the holidays. Not that she needed to put on a festive kimono…

“Miss Hanekawa, too, always said she hates being seen in regular clothes by people she doesn’t like.”

I had no idea why Senjogahara tacked on that anecdote. Maybe it was supposed to be a joke–some private joke, since she was the only one who chuckled.

Well, how kids chose to dress themselves wasn’t my concern, so I wasn’t going to complain. If she wasn’t wearing anything just to deny me any glimpse of her wardrobe, that would be an issue, but as long as she had something on, be it a uniform or anything else, then no problem.

No problem at all.

Bringing our mutual fashion appraisal to a close, I asked, “There any family restaurants around here?”

“What, you’re escorting a lady out at night, but you don’t have a reservation anywhere?”

“I’m an uncouth boor, ignorant in the ways of the world, but when I’m escorting a lady out at night I always make a reservation. Which is why I don’t have one now.”

“…”

“This way,” Senjogahara said, clicking her tongue loudly enough for me to hear. She had a long way to go before she could engage in a war of words with a con man.

Or so I thought, feeling superior to a kid.

The place that she led me to was not a family restaurant but a fast food chain: Mister Donut. Open 24 hours. I didn’t know Mister Donut even had 24-hour locations.

Maybe high school students of the Senjogahara type feel more at home in fast food joints than in family restaurants. They’re easier to go to by yourself. Or maybe she was just trying to harass me, a grown man, by taking me to a sweets shop, but I like sweets, so the joke was on her.

Senjogahara didn’t know this, but the second time I met up with Araragi was also at a Mister Donut. He and his loli slave were regulars there, though, so I needed to give the place a wide berth.

“I’m just going to have water, Kaiki, so you’d better order something.”

“I’ll treat you, you know?” I offered, not meaning it at all, and got exactly the reaction I expected.

“What a bad joke. And if you’re not joking, I’d never let myself get treated by you.”

“Then cough up yesterday’s plane fare. Which reminds me, I ended up paying the bill at the coffee shop too.”

“That’s…” she started to say, then left off. She must have wanted to mouth some retort. After clearing her throat, she simply requested, “Please give me a little more time.”

“You should try to think before you speak,” I chided. For once I had the other person’s interests at heart. “I bet you spoke to Nadeko Sengoku with the same lack of forethought.”

“…”

Judging by the lack of a response, I must have guessed correctly. My impression of the Hitagi Senjogahara of two years ago had been that she could only think about what was right in front of her, for better or for worse; there was no later, there was only now. Finding a boyfriend only seemed to have exacerbated that tendency.

Come on, Araragi.

That’s what you should be working on.

I perfunctorily ordered some donuts at the counter and an iced coffee to go with them. I thought about ordering a drink for Senjogahara, but if she said water was what she wanted, then water was what she would get. I had no obligation to be more solicitous towards her than that.

By the way, I went for iced over hot based on the supposition that I might throw my beverage in her face again.

In other words, just in case.

While I was ordering, collecting my points, and collecting my order, Senjogahara saved some seats for us–it’s not like there was much competition at that time of night, of course, but I thanked her anyway. Thanks don’t cost a dime.

I sat down and realized that something felt off.

The heat was turned up, but Senjogahara made no move to take off her coat, her hat, or her scarf.

I'm sure everyone had excused this sort of behavior on Nadeko Sengoku's part as "cuteness," but my own sensibility was different, and this was Senjogahara, not Sengoku, so I pointed and said, "Why are you still wearing all of that, it's making me hot just to look at you."

"I want to, but this isn't Okinawa…"

"Huh? Obviously not."

"No, I mean…I'm outside town, but I might still run into someone I know, so…that's why."

Ah, so it was a last-minute disguise.

True, she was much harder to recognize wearing that hat and scarf. At the same time, it was making her stand out and might get some stares…

"Wouldn't it just be better to tell Araragi the truth? He's not such an obstinate jerk that he'd refuse to listen if you explained it carefully and logically and didn't get emotional."

"Right, but… He has some misconceptions about my relationship with you."

"Misconceptions?"

"He's under the mistaken impression that you were my first love. Thanks to your unwelcome, or should I say, malicious lies."

"…"

Misconceptions. Mistaken impressions. Sure. Pretty much.

People want their current love to be their first love. They fell in love for real for the first time. If that's what they want to believe, then who am I to say otherwise?

“Sorry about that, especially since you were only being led down the garden path,” I said out of kindness, trying to make her feel better, but Senjogahara’s lips curled as if she were in pain, and she didn’t respond.

What the hell was her deal?

What did she want from me? No, she’d already told me.

She wanted me to “deceive Nadeko Sengoku,” and that was it.

No need to mind the other stuff.

“Hey, Senjogahara. There’s something I want to ask you.”

“What.”

“When you’re sitting at a table like this, do you take your handbag with you every time you get up?”

“Huh? Where did that come from? Yeah, I guess so, at least when I’m sitting at a table with you. Who knows what you might do?”

“Don’t make assumptions about me. So, for instance, you were celebrating New Year’s at the Araragis’ today. When you went out into the hall to talk to me on the phone, did you take your bag with you?”

“No, why would I? Even I wouldn’t be that rude.”

“Hmm. I suppose.”

“Why did you ask me that out of nowhere?”

“Because–I think Nadeko Sengoku was the kind of person who took her handbag with her in that situation–or that’s my first impression after meeting her today.”

“You met her? Today? Earlier? Just like that?” Senjogahara’s eyes went wide as if all her drowsiness had suddenly dissipated. It seemed to be a genuine shock to her. “Was it really that easy? Meeting a

god, even one like her? That's… Does this mean you're the real deal as a–"

"I'm a fake. You know that."

"…"

Senjogahara shut her mouth and didn't try to ask again. Maybe she thought it was a trade secret that I wouldn't divulge under any circumstances, that my lips were sealed. Actually, if she had just asked, I would have told her that a 10,000-yen note in the offertory box was all it took to make Nadeko Sengoku show her face.

But Senjogahara was too discreet to press me, so I moved the discussion along.

"Seemed to me like she's lived these past thirteen or fourteen years without ever trusting anyone, without ever being able to confide in anyone."

"I doubt it… At least, from what I've heard it seems like she trusted Araragi fully."

"If that were true, we wouldn't be where we are now. Araragi is definitely in the wrong on this one. No room for excuses there."

I was just being honest, but I guess Senjogahara thought I was slandering her boyfriend unfairly.

"You have her back, don't you," she said, her voice tinged with rage. "Don't tell me you were taken in by her 'cuteness' when you met her in the flesh."

"What? Me?" I threw back, puzzled. First she gets angry, then this nonsense–I wasn't about to ride along on some childish emotional rollercoaster. Senjogahara herself seemed embarrassed once she realized how off-base her words were.

"Right…of course not. I'm sorry. I see how wrong I was."

“I have to say that such an earnest apology for such a trivial thing is actually kind of off-putting, but–Senjogahara. Nadeko Sengoku was definitely brought up in an environment that merits some sympathy.”

“Sympathy–”

“And I sympathize with her. But that’s all in the past, and now she seems to be enjoying herself, more or less. Anyway, what does it matter? It was a long time ago, even by her reckoning. Just like our relationship was a long time ago. Water under the bridge.”

“Our relationship is not water under the bridge, nor was it all that long ago–or rather, I’m taking issue with the wrong thing. Kaiki, whatever water might be flowing under whatever bridge, you and I have no relationship.”

“Fair enough.”

No argument there. No relationship. Exactly. Even at that moment we just happened to be sitting at the same table. I wasn’t trying to provoke her, but the conversation was starting to go off the rails. I must’ve been tired.

Time to get things back on track–no, better to just skip straight to the conclusion.

“Senjogahara. You can relax.”

“Hunh?”

“Duping that girl is going to be a piece of cake.”

“A piece of cake… What do you mean? Pulling one over on someone that dangerous–a serpent god who’s not even human anymore–”

Senjogahara seemed to think it was another mean-spirited joke, and there was a note of harsh reproach in her voice. At the same

time, she seemed to be struggling to keep a stiff upper lip, and I realized just how frightened of Nadeko Sengoku she was.

Fighting on month after month, defying her fate, she must have felt only the more powerless for it.

But she hadn't given up; of course Hitagi Senjogahara hadn't. But as a result of her struggles, she couldn't accept my words at face value. Well, these were my words, so she probably couldn't ever.

Fine by me.

"If it were that simple, I wouldn't have gone to the trouble of hiring you."

"For you, it wouldn't be that simple. Same goes for Araragi. Nothing in the world could be more difficult for either of you. But it ought to be possible for me, or just about anyone else."

Since skipping straight to the conclusion had clearly been a mistake, I backed up and explained everything from the beginning like I had meant to in the first place.

"Nadeko Sengoku is stupid."

"…"

"Not in the sense that she gets bad grades–though they must've been bad. Her foolishness and childish ineptitude seem to have been constantly overlooked, and she's immature for her age."

"Constantly overlooked…" Senjogahara repeated my words back to me. "Because she's 'cute'?"

I decided the clarification didn't require a response and ignored it. "Deceiving her will be easier for me than deceiving a ladybug. Conversely, teaching a ladybug the multiplication tables would be easier than teaching them to that girl."

"Don't you think you're overstating the case?"

Senjogahara, sticking up for that girl? Who would've thought. Or more likely, she was still having trouble accepting my words.

No surprise there.

She didn't want to imagine that her and Araragi's lives were under threat from someone who was a step below a ladybug on the IQ scale, whether it was true or not.

It was true. As far as I knew.

Disregarding Senjogahara's psychological resistance, I began to go over my plan. It was late, and I had to keep moving things along.

"It might take a while, though… I'll go up to the shrine once every three days or so and build a rapport with Nadeko Sengoku, slowly deepening our relationship and winning her trust, then next month, maybe? I'll tell her you and Araragi died in a car accident. And that'll be the end of it."

"The end of it? With that pathetic excuse for a lie? The truth will come out in no time. A car accident of all things, what is this, amateur hour? The second she comes down from the mountain, bam. We're done for."

"*If* she comes down from the mountain. But she isn't going to. Killing you two would be the only reason for her, and if she hears that you're already dead, that reason vanishes into thin air."

"I'm sure you're just simplifying things and are actually planning to talk her out of killing us with some artful deception… Normally, though, if she heard that, wouldn't she want to confirm our deaths for herself?"

Senjogahara's suspicion, or rather anxiety, that Nadeko Sengoku would descend from the shrine for that purpose was right on the money.

Indeed.

Under ordinary circumstances.

If the mark were anyone else, then yes, the job would call for all manner of precautions: preparing fake corpses, altering family registers, manipulating the media–and 100,000 yen wouldn't be nearly enough. But with Nadeko Sengoku, there was no need to worry.

Such preparations were unnecessary.

"She won't confirm it. Not a chance. She'll swallow it without a second thought. She'll be disappointed that she didn't get to kill you with her own hands–or her own hair–but I very much doubt she'd bother to come down the mountain to see for herself."

"How can you be so sure?"

"We chatted. You never really had a conversation with her–if you had, you'd understand. Basically, she's too spoiled, too much of a baby, to imagine that someone would lie to her or deceive her–she's unable to trust anyone but has no use for suspicion either. That's the kind of environment she grew up in."

In short, she was a princess who had no idea how harsh the world is. To put it another way, it was the result of years of abuse in the form of "pampering."

"She may be the indirect victim of the con I was running six months back–but I'm not so sure she sees it that way. She might actually think it was all just some big mistake that she ended up the object of that charm, that curse."

"So she's slow on the uptake when it comes to malice," Senjogahara gave her own interpretation. At the tender age of eighteen, life had already taught her to distinguish the sweet from the bitter. It was a pretty accurate interpretation.

…Eighteen, wasn't she?

Her birthday is July seventh, I think. I celebrated it with her two years ago. I bought her a cake, which she seemed to enjoy in her own impassive way.

That was before my deception came to light, of course, and she hadn't been consumed by suspicion yet. Still, she'd been wary of the self-proclaimed ghostbuster who had come into her life.

Getting her to open up to me had been a struggle–in comparison to that, deceiving Nadeko Sengoku was almost too easy.

"All that being said, the risk is steep if I do fail, so maybe this job isn't such a walk in the park after all. If, by some miracle, she sees through me, my life won't be worth a plug nickel. Precisely because she's slow to pick up on malice, I doubt she could handle even the kind of insignificant ill will that most people brush off without a second thought."

"And because she couldn't and didn't brush it off, she's trying to kill me and Araragi."

"Yeah. I don't know what he did to the girl–" Actually, a lot of things, it seemed, none of which I'd wanted to hear, but I wouldn't be a man if I ratted him out to Senjogahara. That stuff didn't seem to be the real issue anyway. "But the reason Nadeko Sengoku isn't cutting you guys any slack doesn't go any deeper than that. I mean, she's in her second year of middle school, she's still a child to begin with…and her apotheosis just seems to have infantilized her further. She's been reincarnated, so to speak."

"…"

"Naturally, I never feel guilty about lying to people or deceiving them–but even if that weren't the case, this job wouldn't bother me. Because in all probability, hearing that you two are dead will make her feel even more liberated. She might even become a pretty

decent god. Of course, she needs to settle down a bit if she's going to achieve the proper degree of majesty–"

I called Nadeko Sengoku to mind. Her carefree smile. Her happy chatter. Her open attitude, which must have been unthinkable while she was still human.

I called to mind the girl who said she was lonely because no worshippers came to her shrine.

"So relax… You guys are as good as saved. Happy day, you don't have to die. Come spring you and Araragi will both blossom into college students, and you can be together all you want. You can give yourselves over to the flames of passion. Provided Araragi gets into college–let's hope he keeps at it. Though there may be one other problem: how to tell him that the matter is resolved. Considering his misconception, you can't tell him straight out that I hoodwinked Nadeko Sengoku for you."

Remembering at that point that I hadn't touched the donuts, I picked up a Pon de Ring. I really love its crazy texture.

"…"

She must have been waiting for me to take one, because as soon as I did, Senjogahara reached out and plucked one of the donuts (a Flocky Chou) from the tray in front of me. Then, loosening her scarf a little, she shoved it into her mouth.

Munch munch munch.

"What's this? I thought you couldn't stand the idea of accepting my generosity."

"Stolen booty is fair game."

"A hell of a standard," I said, but I understood the sentiment. I even respected it.

“With Araragi… I’ll take care of it somehow. Don’t trouble yourself about it.”

“That’s how I’d prefer it, naturally… But are you sure you can handle it? He’ll ruin everything if he waltzes up to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine after I’ve worked my magic on Nadeko Sengoku.”

“Sure, he’s liable to head up there if I leave him to his own devices. Even now, what he’s doing is more about rescuing Nadeko Sengoku than saving himself.”

“Rescuing…”

“That’s the kind of guy he is.”

“…”

How was he going to rescue her?

He probably equated it with turning her back into a human. But did a half-vampire who was making no attempt to reclaim his own status, who seemed to have no intention of doing so, have the right?

How did he balance the books in that regard? I had to wonder–nah, not really. I couldn’t possibly care less.

I could care less, however, about my beautiful handiwork being ruined by his folly. Six months ago, all I had to do was beat a retreat, but this time my life was on the line.

I prize money more than life itself, but I’m well aware that unlike money, life isn’t something you just recoup.

There’s no recovering from that loss.

No exceptions.

“Are you sure you can take care of it?” I asked Senjogahara. “If you’re just being bullheaded…if you’re just saying so to keep me and Araragi apart, then you’d better tell me now.”

“That’s partly it…well, more than partly, but tricking him isn’t your job, it’s mine. That’s one thing I can’t let you help me with. If I did, how could I go on calling myself his lover?”

“That’s a bunch of narcissistic bullshit,” I ruled. Because I really thought so. No other reason. But since she insisted, I might as well let her handle it. I was just as reluctant to see Araragi as she was to let me see him.

“I have no choice but to somehow convince him to give up on Nadeko Sengoku…though not giving up on her is exactly what makes him who he is…the man I love.”

My my my, the proudest little hen in the henhouse.

It really made me want to say something mean.

“Shouldn’t be too hard. All you have to do is give him an ultimatum: ‘either she goes, or I go.’ He’ll have to give up on her if you get all shrewish on him.”

“…’Scuse me.”

Senjogahara stood up without responding to my little jest. I thought maybe she was leaving in anger–the trains had likely stopped running, though, and I couldn’t let her go on her own–but that wasn’t the case. She was just going to the powder room.

She did take her handbag with her.

Very prudent.

She impressed me at every turn.

My little jest, and how she might convince Araragi, aside–there was probably no need to be particularly anxious on that front.

Because upon reflection, Senjogahara had been like my apprentice, even if only for a little while, when it came to b.s. She

probably felt too loyal to her boyfriend to flat-out dupe him, but she'd learned enough from me to sweet-talk him into it.

Araragi might let himself be sweet-talked, despite having some inkling of what was going on, just for her sake. It would likely be a tough choice for him, but also a good opportunity to learn that the world doesn't always make things easy on us. Otherwise, Koyomi Araragi could eventually end up as the next Nadeko Sengoku.

But this was their affair. Their love affair.

I was staying out of it.

It wasn't for me, a third party, an unrelated outsider, to stick my nose into–they could play at love, enjoy their lovers' game, forever for all I cared.

Although the job wasn't over yet–which is to say, the preparations were complete, but I had barely begun–a certain weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

Did I feel like it was in the bag?

Yet being the irredeemably suspicious person that I am, I still managed to find some cause for concern. Yup, it wasn't as if there was nothing to worry about.

Forget what Koyomi Araragi might do, what I really needed to be worried about was, you guessed it–

"Sorry 'bout that," said Senjogahara, returning to the table.

Intending to make a pro-forma apology for my earlier jibe, I looked over at her. But I was shocked into silence, completely taken off guard–her eyes were bright red.

Anyone, no matter how poor their powers of observation, could tell at a glance that they were puffy from crying.

We're not just talking about a few stray tears here, she seemed to have been crying her eyes out–why else would they be swollen up like some ruffian had punched her? And upon closer inspection, they were still moist.

"Kaiki," she said.

Her voice, too, was tearful.

"Thank you. I'm grateful."

Senjogahara had received her "death sentence" from Nadeko Sengoku two months ago, back in November. Every day since had been a battle against the fear of death.

That's not to say that Araragi, who had died time and again–who had experienced death time and again thanks to the blood of an immortal vampire coursing through his veins–wasn't also afraid, but surely his fear couldn't compare to the mortal terror that Senjogahara was feeling.

Which is why, at last.

At long last, Hitagi Senjogahara could relax a little–though it wasn't cute of her, but quite funny, that she'd fled to the powder room because she didn't want to cry in front of me.

To be sure, she might still have kept a stiff upper lip if it were only her life that was on the line–but at the prospect of her sweetheart's survival, I guess she just couldn't hold back the tears.

That's the kind of woman she is.

That's the kind of fool she is.

At any rate, the conversation stalled out at that point (any time I tried to say something, Senjogahara would just incoherently express her gratitude to me, making it more or less impossible to proceed), so I led her out of Mister Donut, shoved a 10,000-yen note into her fist, and bundled her into a taxi like a piece of luggage.

I'd been foiled in my attempt to bring up my lingering anxiety, "what I really needed to be worried about," but that was something I didn't need to discuss with Senjogahara and could just keep to myself for now.

Since it seemed like it was going to be such a piece of cake to hoodwink Nadeko Sengoku, I was definitely trying to maintain my equilibrium and forcing myself to identify something, anything, to be anxious about.

I watched the taxi carrying Senjogahara pass through the intersection, then returned to my hotel where I proceeded to update my notes.

I was not keeping a record of the job–given the line of work I'm in, leaving a written record would be the height of folly.

Nor was I keeping a diary–I was working on my plan. Making notes for the future. I had to add more information to my map. You can't go on using an outdated GPS forever.

Next I made a few calls.

There were some people I had to talk to who weren't awake during the day–I was laying some groundwork, or making the preliminary preparations for some preliminary preparations, something along those lines. Duping Nadeko Sengoku would be easy in and of itself, but that didn't mean I could cut corners.

I had to double- and triple-check everything before I tackled this job.

The real problem…will be expenses, I thought as I drew in a likeness of Nadeko Sengoku. I drew a picture of the offertory box as well, adding a "↓"and a sketch of Yukichi Fukuzawa whose portrait graces the 10,000-yen note.

Yup. That was “what I really needed to be worried about,” the issue I had failed to bring up.

“Ten thousand, every time I see her… With my remaining funds, not even five more visits.”

Nadeko Sengoku.

An expensive woman.

Unfortunately, though, in order to win her trust, in order to deepen our relationship to the point that I could feed her the lie about Senjogahara and Araragi’s deaths (as long as we got to that point, she would buy it; the problem was getting to that stage in our relationship), five visits probably wouldn’t cut it.

Every three days or so, I’d told Senjogahara, but every day would be even better if I could make it work–maybe call it the traditional “hundred-day pilgrimage” for granting a wish.

I’d also warned Senjogahara that I’d bill her if my expenses exceeded 100,000 yen, but it’d be impossible to collect in practice.

She might be a good student, but that was a bad debt.

A woman that capable wouldn’t need to resort to selling herself, she could make plenty of money from a regular part-time job–or from helping out with her father’s work, but it was dangerous for me to get involved in any long-term dealings with her.

The best course of action was to collect what I could collect when the job was done before high-tailing it out of there.

Probably for the first time in my life, I was facing the almost unthinkable prospect of paying out of pocket for a job, of voluntarily taking a loss.

Oh boy.

That said, the thought of cutting ties with Hitagi Senjogahara once and for all brought me a feeling of relief; my mind was like a majestic, cloudless blue sky.

Around three o'clock in the morning I finished my notes and went to bed.

The next morning, I waited for opening time, then headed first to a bookstore in the shopping district. Not because it was the day a magazine I read regularly comes out. I don't do that in the first place. Magazines? Do they hold bullets?

Consulting the store map just inside the automatic door and seeing that the "Children's Corner" was on the seventh floor, I got into the elevator.

I found what I was looking for right away.

A Cat's Cradle Compendium–it was a relatively large bookstore, so there was very likely a more serious, adult-oriented guide on a shelf somewhere, but it'd be too complicated.

Not for me. For Nadeko Sengoku. Mm-hmm, this one seemed to be at the right level for her intellect.

I hate when they put a generic dust jacket on the book at the register, but the clerk put one on without asking me. I was slightly irritated, but only slightly. It wasn't something a grownup should get upset about.

Naturally, I didn't intend to take the book to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine as is, that would ruin everything. If I made an offering of it, Nadeko Sengoku might thank me, but her admiration would be for the book and not for me.

Instead I would memorize the book, adding it to my store of knowledge, and display my mastery to Nadeko Sengoku. *Then* my stock was sure to appreciate.

Trying to impress a naïve middle school girl seemed petty and vain, and I hated myself a little bit for it, but a job's a job. Nah, I didn't hate myself at all.

It's only natural to go all out to achieve success.

I left the bookstore and went into a nearby Starbucks. I ordered a grande and drank it black.

Reading around at random in *A Cat's Cradle Compendium,* I began memorizing techniques along with their respective names–until I realized that it was kind of pointless to learn the moves when I didn't actually have a cat's cradle on me.

It would have been nice if I'd had some string to hand, but no, no such luck. I considered for a moment, stood up, and came back with a bunch of paper napkins.

On them I drew diagrams of the techniques in pen–I was just copying out the contents of the book, but as with the visualization maps I draw before beginning a job, the image gets burned into my brain once I've drawn it with my own hand. As for whether I could actually perform the techniques, we'd find out when the time came…

"Okay. Got it," I said experimentally. Trying the words on for size. Naturally there was no need to memorize the entire book in one day; for the moment I just needed to pick up a few techniques that a kid might find interesting.

Feeling like I had reached a good stopping point, I closed *A Cat's Cradle Compendium*–and when I did, naturally my field of vision expanded. As a result, I discovered that someone was sitting across the table from me.

It wasn't so crowded that people needed to share tables, and even if it had been, I didn't think anyone would be so bold as to sit with me. I wasn't wearing what Senjogahara refers to as my "funeral

suit," so maybe this occasion was different, plus the interloper was an acquaintance of mine: the *shikigami* Yotsugi Ononoki.

Puzzle solved.

"Yaaay. Peace peace, Big Brother." Holding the sugary concoction she had apparently ordered for herself in one hand, with the other Ononoki made a sideways peace sign and held it up to her eye.

"…"

Her character traits had changed again.

Seemed like she'd fallen in with the wrong crowd.

"Long time no see, Big Brother Kaiki. How long has it been, anyway?"

"Don't call me 'Big Brother.'" Silently thanking the clerk who had placed the dust jacket on *A Cat's Cradle Compendium,* I casually put the book down next to me and said, "I've told you before, just call me Kaiki." It put me in mind of Nadeko Sengoku calling me "gramps" the day before.

Being called "gramps" made me feel depressed, but being called "Big Brother" grossed me out.

"Really? Still, I can't address you so informally. Yaaay."

Just as I was wondering if her laudable attitude was sincere, she inexplicably threw in another sideways peace sign.

"Have you been getting cozy with Araragi?" I asked, hazarding that he was the "wrong crowd" in question. I was the one who'd told Ononoki, or rather Kagenui, about him in the first place.

As such, perhaps some responsibility for Ononoki going astray lay with me–perhaps it was just my imagination.

“Which reminds me, that must have been the last time we saw each other. When I told you guys about Araragi–so where’s Kagenui? Is she here too?”

“Uh-uh. Sis–uh oh, hang on, I think this was supposed to be a secret.”

“A secret?”

“As in confidential,” Ononoki said before taking a few big gulps of her sugary drink. How nice of her to explain the word “secret” for my benefit. Not that “secret” or “confidential” meant anything to me.

That violent onmyoji had seemingly abandoned her girl familiar and was off somewhere doing whatever–she’s even more dangerous than me, in her own way, so I always try to keep tabs on her movements, but there’s plenty that gets by me.

And she was smack dab in the middle of getting by me.

“Well, as long as Kagenui doesn’t get in the way of my business, ultimately I really don’t care what she’s doing, or where… You’re her watchdog, though, aren’t you? What the hell are you doing here, Ononoki?”

“I came to you.”

“?”

Just as I was wondering what that could possibly mean, she amended, “I came to see you.”

I’d thought there was some deep meaning behind her words, but apparently she’d misspoken… Another result of hanging out with the wrong crowd?

“As a messenger from Ms. Gaen.”

“Gaen…”

I was on high alert the instant that name cropped up. “Gaen” alone was more than enough to make me tense up, but coming from Ononoki, it could only refer to one person: Gaen-senpai.

Izuko Gaen.

“I bring a warning from Ms. Gaen.”

“Wait, hang on, I don’t want to hear it. Don’t say it.”

“She says *withdraw,*” Ononoki continued, heedless of my protestations. She still hadn’t learned a thing about human emotions–if Araragi was going to teach her anything, I wish he’d forget about sideways peace signs and teach her some consideration.

If you have to hear that advice from me, though, it might be too late for you.

But–

“Withdraw?”

“Withdraw from the town… Lessee, what was it again… Ms. Gaen told me to deliver her message word for word, so I want to tell you exactly what she said, but I’m afraid I don’t remember…”

“You’re a terrible messenger, you know that?”

“Yaaay.”

Another sideways peace sign.

Painful.

“*No one like you,*” began Ononoki, seemingly having recalled the message. She was imitating Gaen-senpai’s voice just barely well enough that I was able to recognize what she was doing. So not very well at all.

It was like nails on a chalkboard.

"*Ought to be stirring up that town–there have been some irregularities, but the place has reached a certain equilibrium. Kaiki, if you make one wrong move, everything will be ruined, it'll be even worse than before. So withdraw.* Peace peace."

"Was that last part in the original message? Or is that your new personality?"

"It's my new personality."

"I see. Because the next time you say it, I'm going to knock you on your ass," I menaced a young girl, which was too much like something Araragi would do, so I followed up with a fawning question. "Would you like another drink?"

"You're just like that kind monster sir." Sadly, even my last bit ended up making me like Araragi. How shameful… "I've still got some of this left, but okay, I'd love a nice warm chocolate chunk scone."

"You think I'd treat you when you've insulted me with comparisons to Araragi?"

Not that I ever had any intention of treating her, I'd only asked to make conversation.

At which point Ononoki stood up and drew a folded 1,000-yen bill out of her skirt. "Keep the change," she said. Apparently she'd folded it up and stuck it in there somewhere. I guess she's not the type to carry around a purse.

I accepted it wordlessly and headed to the register. I ordered a chocolate chunk scone, not forgetting to ask them to heat it up, and then returned to the table with it.

"Much obliged."

"Hmph," I shrugged and faced Ononoki again, folding my arms and leaning back. "Gaen-senpai *seems* to understand me, but actually, she doesn't always–what can I say. Obviously, being

commanded to withdraw makes me even more eager to carry out my task."

"She said she'd pay you if need be."

Ononoki looked at me, munching on the chocolate chunk scone. The sight of the mushed-up food in her mouth was revolting. I couldn't help but realize, not for the first time, that the girl sucked at eating.

"Ms. Gaen actually provided that thousand also."

"Despicable. You can't buy a person's heart," I said. I thought it wouldn't hurt to try the line just once in my life. Incidentally, my usual line is that a person's heart is unprofitable. "Just out of curiosity, how much is she offering?"

After falling silent for a moment, Ononoki indicated the sum: "Three million yen."

It wasn't the kind of money that gets discussed at a table in a coffee shop, however classy an establishment Starbucks might be.

Three million yen. Definitely a hefty sum, but what exactly can you buy with it? Well, a Premium Pass, for one. I could fly 600 times this year. Wonderful. I already can't make full use of the one I have, and the other one would be left entirely untouched.

Putting that aside, I considered the offer.

Which is to say, it was at least a sum worth considering. But after considering it for a full thirty minutes, I said brazenly, "I'm going to have to refuse. Talk may be cheap, but I'm not." This was another line I'd always wanted to try out. Or was it a line I'd never thought I'd have a chance to use? Well, same difference. "Tell her she seems to have put the decimal in the wrong place."

"Unfortunately, I can't reach Ms. Gaen anymore. Incommunicado, you might say, service discontinued. If you want to

tell her, you're going to have to yourself, Big Brother Kaiki–I mean Kaiki."

"…"

What a useless girl. What a useless familiar.

But I couldn't reach Gaen-senpai either. Or rather, no one in the world could. She was the kind of person who just showed up as she pleased whenever she had some business or took an interest in something. And yet she might butt into a conversation when she was far away–again, as she pleased.

"Basically," Ononoki began anew. Seemingly what came next would be her own take on things rather than a message from our mutual acquaintance–"I think she's worried about what will happen if you fail."

"Worried? Did you say Gaen-senpai is worried? Now that's a laugh."

"I mean, I'm sure she believes you'll succeed. I think she has the utmost faith in her exceptional junior."

"…"

The girl was just innately unpleasant to be around.

Belief, faith… Look at that innocent face, what kind of education was she getting?

"You're planning to pull one over on Nadeko Sengoku, right?"

"Dunno," I played dumb. To be precise, I was making a show of playing dumb. But just because it was a blatant lie didn't mean it was pointless. I was expressing my unwillingness to have a forthright discussion with her without actually having to say so.

Oshino does that a lot, and so do I.

“Yeah… I bet you’ll succeed–for someone of your wit, Kaiki, or actually, for anyone, duping her should be a piece of cake.”

A piece of cake.

It was almost as if she’d been listening to my conversation with Senjogahara the night before. Maybe it was via Gaen-senpai.

“But the risks if you fail are too great. Right now, Nadeko Sengoku has the divine might to wipe out something on the order of that town like it’s nothing. When she realizes you’ve tricked her and throws a temper tantrum…we’re not talking about just one or two victims.”

“Temper tantrum… She’s not a kid,” I started to say, then shut my mouth.

She was a kid.

And one who was immature for her age, what you might call a “babified” child.

“Even if the chance of success is nine out of ten, no one would risk it if number ten was a nuclear bomb, right? Gambling isn’t about your winning percentage, it’s about considering the risks and rolling the dice.”

“Don’t try to explain gambling to me.”

“You’re right,” Ononoki nodded in a rare moment of ready acquiescence. “Still, maybe Big Brother Oshino’s already got the whole *stirring up placid situations and nosing around in things best left alone* angle covered.”

“…”

She was comparing me to Oshino?

That was the biggest insult imaginable.

At the same time, if it were Oshino here instead of me–if Senjogahara had succeeded in finding him and asking him for help, surely Gaen-senpai wouldn't be interfering like this. The thought made me feel abashed.

Sow the wind and reap the whirlwind, no mistake about that.

"Then… Has Gaen-senpai been to that town, too? It certainly sounds like she knows what she's talking about."

"I mean, spoiler alert, but it's Ms. Gaen who's been working hard to get that town back on track–though it's news to me, too, and I don't know the whole story."

"Back on track?"

It wasn't–back on track at all.

With Nadeko Sengoku the way she was, and Senjogahara and Araragi's lives at stake, how the hell–no, wait.

Sure, on a micro level the town was massively out of whack, but when you really thought about it, with the advent of a deity at that air pocket of a shrine, maybe things were very much "back on track," spiritually speaking.

Was I getting in the way of that rectification?

By meddling with Nadeko Sengoku?

"I'm…confused," I admitted. "Are you saying it was Gaen-senpai who set Nadeko Sengoku up as a god? That she's pulling the strings–"

"Well, not quite… Originally, a human being becoming a god wasn't part of the plan. Ms. Gaen's scheme seemed to be to turn that crusty old senior citizen…um, what's her name, the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, into a god."

"…?"

Now I was even more confused. Gaen-senpai had tried to set up Koyomi Araragi's loli slave as a god–to what end?

What was it that *hadn't* happened?

"That vampire used to be revered as a god, so I guess she seemed right for the job, but something went wrong–apparently, someone intervened for some reason, and the position went to Nadeko Sengoku…"

"Hmm."

Well, I'd had a hard time believing that some teenage puppy love was directly responsible for the birth of a god, even if I'd laid the foundation for it myself, but was I getting a glimpse of the real scene here? Or the behind-the-scenes–

"It was the former Kissshot's fault that the town got spiritually screwed up in the first place. I think Ms. Gaen just wanted to make her take responsibility…"

"You say someone intervened, but who's this someone? Gaen-senpai being who she is, she must have already figured that out."

"I think so, yeah. That is, I think she knows. But she didn't tell me that much. I can't help but wonder if it isn't some sort of secret society."

"Oh, think whatever you like."

Nothing to be gained by playing it straight with this shikigami, so I left it at that. Gaen-senpai must have given her only the minimum amount of information, or not even the minimum.

Maybe the aim here was to make me waste my energy milking Ononoki for info–though trying to work out what Gaen-senpai was thinking was itself a Sisyphean task.

"The current situation is very much not what Ms. Gaen had in mind–still, however, she says the situation isn't all that bad. Y–"

Ononoki started to say something else but stopped herself. Probably *yaaay.* So she did have some capacity to learn.

"–aaay."

Or not. The brakes had failed, it seemed, and the rest made it out. She narrowly managed to lower the scissor-fingered hand she had started to raise, though.

I wondered if, as a man, I should knock the little girl on her ass like I'd warned, but I gave her the benefit of the doubt and assumed that it was involuntary, like a hiccup.

It's worth pretending to be generous sometimes.

"So someone had to become a god in that spiritually screwed-up town, and anyone would do?"

Senjogahara's mysterious ailment dated back more than two years, so I found it difficult to lay the blame solely on Araragi's loli slave's shoulders–but that vampire was definitely responsible for my curse actually "manifesting" in Nadeko Sengoku's body.

Not that I didn't also bear some of the responsibility.

"Yup," confirmed Ononoki. "Seems like Ms. Gaen came to that conclusion after Sis and I went there…but I don't know the particulars. If you're really desperate to know, ask Ms. Gaen or Sis directly."

"Neither of those options appeals to me."

"I feel you. Peons like us don't need to know the details," remarked Ononoki–lumping me in with her as a peon was hard to excuse, but I guess that's how it seemed from her standpoint.

Me, Yozuru Kagenui, Yotsugi Ononoki, we were all peons to Gaen-senpai–not a single person with any connection to Izuko Gaen was more than a "peon" in her eyes. She seemed friendly, but was

magnificently dominant. If there was one exception, maybe it was Mèmè Oshino, whose whereabouts were currently unknown.

"Anyway, she says to withdraw. My orders were simply to relay that message to you. So now, your own orders are simply to withdraw."

"Didn't I already tell you? I refuse. If you can't get that message to her, that's fine. It's not like this is a job interview, no need to go to the trouble of contacting her to inform her that I decline."

"I just remembered one other part of the message," Ononoki said after finally finishing off the chocolate chunk scone. Maybe the sugar circulating in her brain had jogged her memory. "*Should you fail to withdraw, you are no longer my junior, and I am no longer your senior.*"

"…"

I had been told to "withdraw" many times in the past, and on those occasions, had sometimes withdrawn and sometimes hadn't, but the message had never been presented in such a threatening manner.

I even felt slightly betrayed to discover that she was the kind of person who'd say such a thing–foolishly, shamefully, even though I talk about how all-important doubt and suspicion are, somewhere deep down, in the heart that must be somewhere inside me, I'd trusted Gaen-senpai.

I thought she wasn't the kind of person who went to any lengths to push her agenda, and that whatever she might say, she respected personal freedom–and yet.

There was a lesson to take home from this.

But what was it?

"What'll you do, Big Brother Kaiki?"

Ononoki addressed me thusly again–but it seemed less like a slip of the tongue due to my injunction slipping her mind than her own way of being considerate, a concession, or something like that. Or was she giving me, contrarian that I am, a nudge in the right direction so I wouldn't make the wrong decision?

A reminder, making certain I understood that I belonged to their side.

I considered it. I had already considered it, but this time I considered it more deeply. I recalled Senjogahara's face from the night before, puffy from crying, and recalled her words of gratitude, directed at none other than me.

Then I considered my relationship with Gaen-senpai, and my stake in all this.

I recalled the figure that had been indicated, three million yen.

"Ononoki," I said. This time it didn't take thirty minutes. "Sure, I'll withdraw."

Naturally I had no intention of withdrawing, and after taking the three million from Ononoki, I headed directly to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

Right off the bat, the money covered the costs of securing the attentions of my hostess, I mean the deity–the alms required to draw her out of the shrine. I was happy not to have to worry about my Sengoku Pilgrimage anymore. At 10,000 yen a day, I could make three hundred visits. Even if I went to the shrine every day until graduation, more than half the money would be left over.

And I was ecstatic to have all my travel and accommodation expenses taken care of. True, the price was making an enemy of Gaen-senpai, but upon consideration she was already something of an enemy, so in fact I was somewhat relieved that the onerous cord

was finally cut. Getting a severance package to boot? Hip hip hooray. Were things going a little too well for me?

I felt like a new man as I ascended the mountain and worshipped at the shrine–and by "worshipped" I mean put a 10,000-yen note into the offertory box.

"Here's Nadeko!" The serpent god appeared in exactly the same way she had the day before. It reminded me of a piggy bank they used to sell at Tokyu Hands. "Ah, Mister Kaiki! You came!" she greeted.

"Well, I am your very first believer, after all." I'd taken a shine to the ridiculous turn of phrase and was keeping it going for a second day. Nadeko Sengoku looked pleased (how starved was she for believers?), but at the same time I felt like it hadn't quite done the trick, so I added, "The truth is there's something I want desperately, so I've decided to make a hundred-day pilgrimage to this shrine. I'll come every day until my wish is granted."

"A hundred-day pilgrimage, huh? Nadeko…might've done one of those before…or not?"

She cocked her head along with the vague pronouncement. Probably it wasn't that her memory was vague; it just didn't matter to her. Maybe she'd made an attempt but hadn't had the will to keep it up.

"So, what's your wish, Mister Kaiki? Is it something Nadeko can grant for you?"

"Ah, it's a little hard to sum up."

She was so lacking in majesty that I lost track of the fact that she was supposed to be the object of my pilgrimage, but if I was going to make a hundred-day commitment, sooner or later I needed to tell her what my as-yet-nonexistent wish was.

It seemed that for the first time in my life (or maybe not, but anyway, for the first time I could recall), I'd be praying to a god.

"Hard to sum up? Like romantic stuff? That kind of thing?" She was probably conflating my wish with what she was dealing with–or had dealt with. "At your age, Mister Kaiki, does it mean you're hoping to get married?"

"Not a chance." I could feel my tone getting overly serious. I had to wonder why I was being so vehement about it but couldn't stop myself from continuing, "Have you ever played a game called *Dragon Quest*?"

"Hm? Played, no, but Nadeko's heard of it."

"Then maybe you'll understand. It's an RPG where you save up gold pieces on your way to beating a demon lord."

"Okay…"

"But if you get killed by a monster, you lose half the gold you worked so hard to save up."

"Right, right."

"When you get married, the same thing happens," I said, giving her a significant look. "So marriage is the same as death."

"Um…" Nadeko Sengoku smiled in seeming perplexity. Maybe she really was perplexed. "Th-Then, how about marrying someone who's richer than you?"

"You don't get it, do you? I don't want to lose any of my own money. It's not about gaining more from the other person than I would lose." My voice was taking on a fevered tone, so regaining some of my composure, I wrapped things up: "Anyway, I'm not interested in getting married. It's impossible to sum up in a few words, like I said." Forget summing it up, I could expend every word

at my disposal and still not be able to convey a wish that didn't exist yet… "If I have to, though, let's say commercial prosperity."

"Co-mersh-ul-pro-sper-uh-tee," Nadeko Sengoku repeated my words back to me as though she was struggling with the spelling. That'd be one thing, but if she didn't know what the words meant, we were in real trouble. "Um, what's your job then, Mister Kaiki?" she asked.

"That's also a little hard to sum up."

Actually it was easy. All you needed was one word: swindler. But telling her that would ruin my plan. She may have forgotten the name Deishu Kaiki, but I was pretty sure she remembered falling victim to a "charm" because of a swindler.

Maybe she'd forgotten, but putting it to the test was too dangerous.

"I'll be making one hundred visits–ninety-eight more, to be precise. So there's no hurry, I'll explain it little by little."

"…Okay! Sounds good!"

Even Nadeko Sengoku seemed to find this a little suspicious, but apparently the prospect of ninety-eight more visits won out, and she was all smiles.

Was she the type where a negative emotion gets erased as soon as a positive emotion comes along? I envy how simple life must be for such a person. Well, she was no longer a person, and as a human, she must have been much more negative.

But–now.

Now, at last.

"Tell me about yourself, Mister Kaiki, a little bit at a time! Nadeko will listen! Because that's what gods do!"

"…"

She could quit harping on the god thing.

Maybe she was just excited because she was new at it–or was it not being human anymore that excited her, that she wanted to emphasize?

Either was fine by me, but both surpassed my comprehension. Fortunately, I didn't have to get it.

"Okay, for today just teach Nadeko some more cat's cradle! Like you promised! Nadeko pretty much mastered all the tricks from yesterday!"

Nadeko Sengoku came down from the main hall, leapt over the offertory box in a single bound, and landed beside me. Quite the athlete–and tomboy.

Had she been like that as a human being?

Leaping over the offertory box, a receptacle for cash, was nothing short of blasphemous. Then again, she'd removed the 10,000-yen note I had tossed in there, and if it was empty, it was probably the god's prerogative to jump over it or do anything else she damn well pleased.

"Right, cat's cradle," I nodded, inwardly preening. My practice had made perfect. I could reproduce all these moves flawlessly in my mind. The book itself, I had (hidden but ultimately) given to that shikigami girl as a present (I hadn't yet memorized the whole thing but was feeling generous). The evidence was gone. There was no danger that my pretense would come to light.

"Sure. Get out the cat's cradle I gave you yesterday." By which I meant the impromptu loop of string I'd made.

"Oh, that? Nadeko played with it so much it broke," Nadeko Sengoku reported, without a moment's hesitation, the overnight

destruction of my gift. I wasn't even sure where the piece of string had come from, so it wouldn't be very mature of me to get mad–but what to do?

If only I'd stopped somewhere and bought a proper cat's cradle, but I'd come straight to the shrine from Starbucks. Not that I knew how a proper one would be better.

"So Nadeko's been practicing with this instead!" she said, producing a loop of string. *She made a new one with some string that was lying around? Great, then there's no problem*–I thought, but there was a big problem. The loop Sengoku produced wasn't made of just any piece of string, but from a white snake presumably plucked from her own head.

The slender serpent was holding its own tail in its mouth like a mini-ouroboros. And Nadeko Sengoku was handing this horrifying cat's cradle to me with a big smile on her face.

"'Kay, Mister Kaiki! Do it, do it!"

"…"

I felt an urgent need to re-program my mental simulator. I was ashamed at my own lack of foresight for coming this far without ever expecting to perform cat's cradle with a snake, and I needed to adjust my understanding of Nadeko Sengoku.

The girl wasn't just stupid, she was also crazy.

She was out of her feeble little mind.

It wasn't until well after I descended the mountain, having continued this giggling romp with the stupid, crazy, out of her feeble little mind Nadeko Sengoku until evening came, that I noticed I was being tailed.

The instant I noticed, my legs unconsciously began to carry me away from the station–you could put it down to the fact that I'm a

battle-worn veteran, or a sly old fox, or to the muscle memory of evasive action taken in the past.

I often pretend to be the thrill-seeking, self-destructive type, but perhaps my instincts prefer safety. So is Deishu Kaiki just another human being? Does that disappoint you? Well, I'm into that version of myself. I think it's cute–and while I can't speak for Nadeko Sengoku, to me "cute" is a compliment.

"…"

Without looking back, I casually, and now consciously, upped my pace. The ground was covered in snow, so I nearly slipped.

Snow country makes it pretty easy to tail someone, when you think about it–the snow creates clear footprints, deadens sound, and even light precipitation will completely mask the form of the person tailing you.

Of course, having noticed that I was being followed, I could exploit corners and blind spots to discover the identity of my tail. If I whirled around and threw down my flat-out adult dash, I might even catch the person–but I also might not, and if I failed, I'd only have succeeded in revealing that I was onto them.

In which case, he or she (or they?) would adopt a new strategy–one that I wouldn't catch on to so easily. And that would spell trouble.

So I decided to leave it alone. I wouldn't put an ounce of effort into discovering the identity of the person following me. I'm not trying to sound sage, but not expending effort is actually quite easy. Easier than expending effort, anyway.

I chose a likely spot to hail a cab and asked to be taken to the station rather than to my hotel. Not the station nearest my hotel, but one stop down the line.

Whoever the person tailing me might be, I didn't think they'd follow me in another taxi at this stage, but I was erring on the side of caution.

It'd be one thing in a big city like Tokyo or Osaka, but a car chase in this nowheresville town might be fun… As I predicted, though, no vehicle followed my taxi.

They seemed to have given up. Too easily. Maybe they'd cut it short for the day–or maybe the little shadow play didn't mean anything, and they were already staking out my hotel.

At this point, I finally wondered who it might be.

Too many possibilities occurred to me, there were too many people who bore me ill will, and the truth is I had absolutely no clue–a fact that was only compounded by being where I was.

"At the same time…" I muttered.

The most likely possibility was, naturally, some peon of Gaen-senpai's–though there was no need to call her senpai anymore.

I may have pulled the wool over Ononoki's eyes, but I had no illusions about doing the same to Gaen-senpai. Once she discovered my betrayal, no, my beautiful decision not to withdraw for the sake of that darling child, she would put me under surveillance–Ononoki, however, had said that she had no means of contacting Gaen-senpai.

In which case Gaen-senpai didn't know what I was up to–this was her, though, so there was a strong possibility that, anticipating my duplicity, she'd put additional people besides Ononoki in place to watch me.

But after considering the matter for a while, I decided I didn't have to worry.

I couldn't rule it out completely, of course, but based on my experience of her in the years since we were at school together,

Gaen-senpai herself had already fully withdrawn from the matter at hand.

And withdrawing, for her, meant withdrawing for good–whatever I might do to come in and muck up her beautiful handiwork, she wouldn't personally set foot in the town again.

So my decision not to worry didn't stem from the remoteness of the possibility, but purely from the idea that I was good as long as Gaen-senpai herself didn't show up.

Unless it was Yozuru or Mèmè, I was good–I could even set a trap for Gaen-senpai by manipulating her peons.

Well, whether or not I'd actually go that far, it seemed prudent to find out what the hell she'd been up to in this town a few months back–it might be important for my work going forward.

Then I considered who the most likely candidate would be if the person tailing me wasn't sent by Gaen-senpai.

One of the middle schoolers who bore me a grudge?

Normally I would have said yes…but if that were the case, why would they go to the trouble of tailing me?

They'd just resort to some violent action, and smash me in the back of the head without warning–though I could also imagine why they might not.

"Are you vacationing here, sir?" the taxi driver asked me.

"Sure, kind of," I nodded. "More of a business trip, really. Work has provided me with an opportunity to come here."

"Work, huh? I knew it. You've got kind of an urban feel about you, sir, so I thought that might be the case."

I wasn't sure if "urban" was a compliment, but I was pretty sure it wasn't an insult, at least, so I acknowledged it with a "Thanks."

“So, what do you think of the place?” he asked.

To which I responded, “I’m enjoying myself. It’s a real thrill ride.”

I didn’t end up boarding a train at the station where the taxi dropped me off, nor did I go back to my hotel. I did an immediate about-face and returned to the town.

I wasn’t being vigilant, I had completely given up worrying about that. As long as they didn’t bother me directly, they were harmless, so I opted to just forget about it. No harm no foul, that’s the kind of guy I am.

There was something else that concerned me more–the fact that Nadeko Sengoku was so broken.

Ultimately that was her right, whether she was stupid crazy or smart crazy, but something about her was incongruous and just felt off-balance.

Maybe getting stuck doing cat’s cradle with a snake had rattled me more thoroughly than I’d expected–but you should’ve seen the smile on Nadeko Sengoku’s face when she innocently manipulated that snake into the shape of a broom, just like I had taught her–thankfully, I hadn’t been so rattled that I forgot how to make the shapes I had memorized. Either way, if she was mentally unstable, I had to stabilize her.

In aid of which, I visited the Sengoku residence again.

This time, however, I had no intention of calling her parents on the intercom and coming in through the front door–there was nothing more I needed to hear from them, so I had no interest in speaking to them again.

Good, law-abiding citizens.

Well, maybe I wasn’t going to get away with literally never speaking another word to them…

I called the Sengokus' on my cell phone from right outside their house–it wasn't so far from Araragi's, by the way, so I was on constant lookout.

I couldn't let my vigilance lapse entirely with regard to being tailed, but in that neighborhood, a chance encounter with Araragi or his little sister Karen was of much greater concern.

It was her father who answered the phone: *Sengoku speaking.*

I unleashed my vaunted gift of gab on him. I had found a clue regarding their missing daughter. Something new had come to light when I compared it with the book I'd taken home from the bedroom they'd been kind enough to let me examine. It wasn't the kind of thing we could discuss over the phone, and I wanted to hear their thoughts on the matter, so could he and his wife come meet me. That was how I played it: circuitous, which is to say reserved, yet carefully calibrated to make it impossible to refuse.

The time being what it was…around nine o'clock at night…Nadeko Sengoku's father wasn't thrilled, but ultimately he acceded to my request. He was honestly worried about his missing daughter, after all.

After hanging up, I watched and waited, and at last a car carrying Mr. and Mrs. Sengoku left the garage and drove away into the night.

Making sure they were gone, I entered the grounds. Cautiously. Yes, I was breaking and entering, but it's a little late to be bringing that up now.

I ignored the front door and went around to the back. I very much doubted that the front door was unlocked, and even if it were, I wasn't going to go in that way.

It was the second-floor windows I was interested in.

I located the window of Nadeko Sengoku's room–more or less right away.

I took a few steps back, just enough to give myself a running start, then took off. The second floor of an average home isn't high enough to require a ladder or rope.

I ran up the vertical wall with my leather shoes and grabbed the frame, then used a bit of rock-climbing prowess to make it the rest of the way.

Opening the window, I climbed inside.

I had unlocked it the day before under the guise of opening and shutting the curtains, and fortunately it did the trick–I say fortunately, but it wasn't a question of chance, it was a premeditated crime.

That said, I hadn't necessarily been sure I'd need to return to her room; unlocking the window was simply a precautionary measure I'd taken–naturally, there were a number of others–but something had bugged me enough that I'd figured it might be worth a return visit.

The closet.

The closet that Sengoku's parents had absolutely not opened because they'd been told absolutely not to–I had come to open it.

That was why I'd set a rendezvous with her parents and gotten them out of the house. A trick I could only use once, it would irreparably damage Mr. and Mrs. Sengoku's impression of me…but so be it. What was done was done.

If you let yourself worry about everything, you'll never accomplish anything.

Now that I had the opportunity, I left the closet for last, and in the gloom, or rather pitch darkness, I made the thorough search I'd

been prevented from conducting by her parents' watchful eyes. Unfortunately, however, this prefatory work yielded nothing.

Even rummaging through her underwear drawer didn't turn up anything interesting–I'd hoped for a secret diary.

Thinking that they might hold some promise, I flipped through the pages of the notebooks sitting atop her desk. The doodles she made during class might provide some insight into her personality. Apparently, she wasn't one for taking notes during class (when else would she?), and the pages were almost entirely blank.

Not into studying.

Nadeko Sengoku.

I hadn't been such a great student myself, but this girl was a little extreme–I guess that was an insight into her personality, revealed by those blank notebooks?

Now then–time for the main event.

I'd set the meeting a bit on the late side, on top of which I'd said something like, "I must apologize in advance, I might be a little late," so I probably had about another hour to continue my search, but I was still in someone else's home.

An unfamiliar habitat.

Definitely no need to overstay my welcome.

I reached for the closet door–a slight resistance. It seemed to be locked. Now it all made sense, her parents couldn't open the closet because it was locked–nope, that explained exactly nothing.

While there was a lock, it was simply the kind where you can insert a ten-yen coin and turn the handle. A lock not worthy of the name. Just a modest assertion that "this is a private space, so no peeking." Nothing more than a reminder to the forgetful.

They say that locks only protect us from the righteous, and this of all locks definitely appealed to people's better natures. Naturally, I rejected the appeal, not having anything resembling a better nature. Case dismissed, this court is adjourned.

I felt around in my pocket for some coins.

It held the change from when I had bought Ononoki's chocolate chunk scone–and fishing out a ten-yen coin, I opened the lock on the closet door.

Inside was the decomposing corpse of a middle-aged man who'd been chainsawed into pieces. Not bloody likely–on first glance a vista of not bloody anything opened before me.

It held clothes, hanging on hangers.

But that wasn't all.

Or rather, the clothes were just camouflage, and behind them.

"What the hell…"

I exited the Sengoku residence and, once I was at some remove, I called Nadeko Sengoku's father and told him that I had been held up and wasn't going to be able to make it.

He was an adult so he didn't let his displeasure show, but it was clear that he'd taken offence. I was prepared for this eventuality, but they weren't going to be as easy to communicate with as they had been up to that point.

Then again, who knows when they might notice that their daughter's room's window had been unlocked. Communicating with them would get more and more dicey as time went on. I would've had to search that closet in the next day or two in any case.

In that sense I had made the right call, but in the end, I'd come up empty-handed.

That stuff.

That stuff–didn't tell me anything.

All it did was put me in a bad mood. But I'm always in a bad mood. It's by no means an exaggeration to say that I'm in a bad mood pretty much anytime I'm not looking at money.

No big deal.

I'd forget about it more or less right away.

I skipped the taxi ride this time, instead heading to the station on foot, where I got on the train and returned to my hotel–well, strictly speaking, I took a small detour.

Why I did this I can't rightly say, and in retrospect it seems like an utterly foolish choice, but I went out of my way to walk by the Araragi residence on my way to the station.

The lights were on, and I just waltzed on by, giving the place the side-eye without saying or doing anything more.

I did happen to glance up at the second floor, but I didn't know which rooms belonged to Araragi or his sisters, so it was pointless. For all I knew their rooms might've been on the ground level–kids' rooms aren't necessarily on the second floor.

Only, as I glanced at the house, the lights still on inside it, I thought, *Seems like he's doing some exam prep.*

This was a total shot in the dark too. A room with a light on late at night by no means meant that it was Araragi's or that he was studying. Maybe he was up playing an FPS or something.

Well, whether it was good luck or nothing out of the ordinary, I safely walked past the Araragi residence and carried on to the station.

How pissed off Senjogahara would be if she found out. I absolutely had to keep it secret from her, but at the same time I felt like calling her right there and then and confessing.

Basically I wasn't just in a bad mood, I was annoyed. I was pissed off that I had come up empty-handed. And since I didn't have anyone to take it out on, I was exposing myself to danger as a means of relieving my stress, I suppose.

Hilarious.

What a delicate flower I am.

Sure, I probably only indulge my self-destructive behavior and urges because I have unshakable confidence in my ability to survive any crisis in which I might find myself, so my hubris is nothing to sneeze at either.

Otherwise I couldn't flout Gaen-senpai's command like that.

Quite right.

Pondering these questions, I got back to the hotel and opened the door to my room–only to find a letter lying on the floor inside my locked room, over by the bathroom.

"…"

A letter?

A white envelope, anyway. I locked the door behind me, then slowly, cautiously approached the envelope and picked it up.

It didn't seem to be a mail bomb. Having confirmed this, no, even before I did, as soon as I picked it up, in fact, I got sick of being cautious, and I tore the envelope open.

"Withdraw," was the entirety of the message on the sheet of paper neatly folded into three. It was written by hand, not typed–but

the penmanship gave absolutely no sense of the author, who must have intentionally modified his or her handwriting.

Thus I had no clue who'd written the message–though it had to be someone who wanted me to withdraw.

"Hmph."

I scrutinized the back of the sheet as well as the inside of the envelope, and once I had confirmed that the message was only that single word, I carefully returned the sheet to the envelope, carefully tore it into pieces, and carefully threw it in the wastebasket.

Then, deciding that throwing it in the wastebasket wasn't enough, I flushed it down the toilet. Since I was already in the bathroom, I proceeded to take a shower.

I'm a guy that loves a hot shower, but this time I opted for a cold one. It was the middle of winter so there was some danger of catching a cold, but I really needed a cool head at the moment.

I considered the situation as my whole body slowly turned blue. How many people knew that I was staying at the hotel? Did Senjogahara know? I had called her out to the station the night before, and perhaps she had deduced the general area I was in. But it's not like this was the only hotel–there was no way she could have guessed I was staying at this one in particular.

Nor would she tell me to "withdraw"… That would be far too illogical for someone as forthright as Senjogahara when she had commissioned me for the job in the first place.

Whoever had been tailing me popped into my head.

Now that I thought about it, it might have been a case of nerves, my mind playing tricks on me–I had felt anxious about my hotel being watched. Which wasn't impossible. Perhaps I'd been under surveillance all along and it'd taken me until now to finally notice.

By enlisting the aid of someone supernatural like Ononoki, Gaen-senpai could probably find out where I was without going to the trouble of tailing or monitoring me. The shikigami always shows up like that so I hadn't been overly concerned, but when you get right down to it, dropping in while I was reading in a Starbucks was suspiciously abrupt.

Even if she could pin down my location, though, that'd be it–no one could place a letter, leave that message, in a locked hotel room.

It would require a certain amount of physical destruction, even if it was Ononoki–I had just broken into the Sengoku home so it's not like that's such a big thing, but my room was on one of the upper stories of a high-rise. Whoever it was definitely couldn't get in through the window. It was fixed and didn't even open.

So who left the letter in my room, and how? My enemy couldn't possibly have an accomplice inside the hotel–enemy?

What enemy? Wasn't my current foe that adolescent god?

"Maybe I'm up against some sort of powerful organization," I said experimentally. Figured I might as well.

Or I was just poaching Ononoki's idiotic comment about a secret society–I actually felt like I might freeze solid, so I adjusted the temperature of the shower and warmed myself back up. Once I was warm enough, I toweled off and left the bathroom, then picked up my cell phone.

For a second I was worried that it might be bugged, but judging that I was "worrying too much," I went ahead and called Senjogahara. Not to confess that I'd strolled by the Araragi place earlier, of course.

"Are you lonely or something, Kaiki? You can't keep calling me like this, night after night…"

“Senjogahara, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“What is it this time? I wore blue underwear today…”

She sounded sleepy. That is, it seemed like she was still half-asleep. I was kind of surprised, I wouldn’t have thought the girl was ever anything less than fully alert. Always taut and tightly wound, like the string of a bass.

“Wake up. Senjogahara.”

“I’m awake…rhubarbrhubarb.”

“Don’t give me that rhubarbrhubarb shit.”

“ZZZZ.”

“That’s not half-asleep, that’s asleep.”

“What do you want? Want me to come out again? Fine, I’ll go anywhere you like… Want to meet at the same Mister D’s as last time?”

“No, I don’t need you to come meet me today.”

Worrying about my phone being bugged was excessive, but meeting in person might still be dangerous. If they’d found out where I was staying, they couldn’t possibly not know about Senjogahara, my client–but as a precaution, it seemed best to avoid direct contact.

“It’s not that, I just need to ask you something.”

“What? About our business?”

“What else would you and I have to talk about?”

“Fair enough…”

Senjogahara, finally seeming ready to listen in earnest, said, “I’m going to go splash some water on my face, hang on a sec,” and put

down the phone. After a little while she returned and asked, “So what’s the deal?”

Fully present.

Incredible. The alacrity with which she switched gears was almost unbelievable.

“I thought you already had a game plan?”

“Yeah–that’s all set. And things are going swimmingly with Nadeko Sengoku. I already had faith, and seeing her today only deepened my conviction.” I realized that I had made it sound as if I really was a believer. The irony being that neither faith, conviction, nor belief were words that had any bearing on my life. “So no problem on that front–” I thought it best not to mention Gaen-senpai or Ononoki yet. It’d probably just make her needlessly anxious. “But something else has come up. Which is why I need to ask you something.”

“Fire away.”

Man, was she dauntless. Switching gears so fast. It was almost as if she had only been pretending to be half-asleep.

“You…or I guess you and Araragi? And maybe Shinobu Oshino, and this Hanekawa? Anyway, in the course of trying to resolve this problem with Nadeko Sengoku, in other words before you came to me for help, did anybody try to interfere?”

“…”

“Interfere or…give you a warning, anything like that? For instance, did you receive a letter telling you to ‘withdraw’–”

Senjogahara was silent for a while, seemingly lost in thought, and then she probed, “Did something happen?”

She seemed to be telling me to disclose my purpose if I wanted her to reply–well, I suppose that was only natural from her

perspective. In fact, I would've been taken aback if she didn't have any such misgivings, if she'd answered such a specific question with a simple yes or no.

I told Senjogahara about the day's events, which doubled as a progress report. Not everything, naturally. I had to cover up the breaking and entering, for instance, even if it had been conducted in the course of the job. If I let that slip, Senjogahara would become an accomplice after the fact.

It was purely a matter of courtesy as a swindler to claim sole responsibility for any illegal behavior. This may be the age of accountability, but that doesn't mean it's a good idea to disclose absolutely everything. Even user-friendliness has its limits.

The part about Ononoki and Gaen-senpai, however, I had no choice but to mention at this point, though I'd have preferred to hold off on it or keep it hidden altogether as well.

"Hmm… Ms. Gaen, huh?"

"Apparently she was in your town a while back, did you happen to meet her?"

"No, I didn't…but Araragi and Miss Hanekawa each dealt with her. Regarding different things. Actually, Nadeko Sengoku became a god in the first place because of Ms. Gaen's talisman–but. You already knew that, didn't you, Kaiki?"

"Yeah. So you did too."

I was about to criticize her for withholding a crucial bit of info, but then I was the one who hadn't let her tell me about the situation–because I didn't want her feelings to muddy the waters. In which case, maybe on the other end of the line she was breathing a sigh of relief that I'd gotten that far.

“Did Gaen-senpai tell them what she told me? Did she tell Araragi and Hanekawa to withdraw?”

“Not Araragi… How could she? That’d be like saying, ‘Give in and let yourself be killed.’ Even a kindergartener knows that’s an unreasonable demand.”

“Very true.”

Gaen-senpai probably thought that Araragi and Senjogahara should die, should be killed, if it served the balance of things, but she’d never say it to their faces.

“But when Miss Hanekawa met her, Ms. Gaen apparently said something unpleasant…so maybe she did to Araragi too. Said something unpleasant, I mean.”

“Hmm…”

“Still, it doesn’t seem like she demanded Miss Hanekawa do anything. More like a friendly warning…”

“Sounds about right. She didn’t try to force my hand either.”

Though she did disown me.

But…if that was the case, maybe I needed to speak to this friend of Senjogahara’s, this Hanekawa, to hear what she had to say. It’s just that I had a premonition that I’d absolutely regret meeting her…

Be that as it may, I had only heard about Gaen-senpai’s aims through Ononoki, a filter so fine it might as well be a plank of wood, and seriously hadn’t a clue as to her true intentions. Hanekawa, on the other hand, received her warning straight from the horse’s mouth, so maybe she’d been able to discern something.

Something…what something?

What would that something need to be to satisfy me?

“Kaiki,” said Senjogahara. “If you want to hear what Miss Hanekawa has to say–” Well well, I’d thought Senjogahara was pathologically opposed to me interacting with any of her friends or family, but here she was, offering to introduce me to Hanekawa? But that wasn’t the case. “You should give up on that idea right now. Of course, being the contrarian that you are, I imagine you’ll try to meet her behind my back, but that’s going to be impossible. She’s overseas at the moment.”

“Overseas… Looking for Oshino?”

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered her saying something about that when we talked back on the first. That Hanekawa was abroad searching for Oshino but hadn’t found him, or whatever–though if I may, as someone who’s known the guy forever, she was barking up the wrong tree.

Oshino is a Japan-only vagabond.

The subject of his research, that is to say, the field of his fieldwork, never extends beyond our borders. Unless his worldview changed considerably, he wouldn’t go overseas–to begin with, he wouldn’t be able to obtain a passport, same as me.

Even if she did find him overseas, bringing him back would be no easy task.

“Another one for futile efforts, huh? This Hanekawa person.”

“Maybe. You might be right. Futile. But that kind of dedication, doing everything she can in spite of it all, is just like her. And I appreciate it.”

“Yeah. Appreciate it,” I agreed indifferently. That kind of dedication was just like her? I didn’t even know this Hanekawa.

“Well, she’d been planning all along to take a trip around the world after graduation, so she just laughed it off as location-

scouting…not that that makes me feel any better. She must have finished location-scouting by the end of last year.”

“A trip around the entire world… That’s quite an undertaking.”

“Some people say it’s Mister Oshino’s influence.”

“Sounds like the student has surpassed the teacher…”

What a fearsome girl–and she was still only in high school.

But given the circumstances, it wasn’t going to be possible to get Hanekawa’s story, at least not right away. We could probably get in touch via phone or email, but I doubted I could get the whole story out of someone I’d never met.

“When is she coming back?”

“I have no idea.”

You must have some idea, I thought. They must be keeping touch by email or phone–so regardless of where Hanekawa was, Senjogahara simply didn’t want to introduce us.

Now that’s friendship.

While it might be unrelated, if she put Hanekawa and me in touch with each other, I might get a better sense of what was going on in Gaen-senpai’s mind, and the chances of Senjogahara’s life being saved might well increase, yet even so?

Theirs was an odd relationship.

“Well, so be it,” I cut short that discussion. I wasn’t going to waste any more time making Senjogahara tell me how she had no intention of telling me. I had to draw the line somewhere. “At any rate, Gaen-senpai seems to be afraid that I might fail and not fulfill your commission to deceive Nadeko Sengoku, which is of course unthinkable–”

“In that case, wouldn’t Araragi and I just get killed like we were going to all along? As far as Ms. Gaen is concerned, that was the plan.”

“No, I think she’s afraid Nadeko Sengoku will be enraged by my attempt to deceive her. It’s a little different from Araragi going up there, or putting up a fight. Deception is, I mean.”

“Well, I guess I can see that.” Senjogahara didn’t seem particularly convinced, but she assented nonetheless. Then, I assume in service of deepening her own imperfect grasp of the situation, she tried an analogy: “In other words, kind of like how confessing your love and getting flat-out rejected is one thing, but confessing your love and getting rejected with a lie like ‘I have a girlfriend’ is unbearable?”

Romance analogies didn’t mean anything to me, but I went ahead and answered, “Right, exactly.” If it worked for Senjogahara, it was good enough for me.

She lapsed into a sullen silence as if she’d read my mind, before bringing the conversation back around. “So according to what you said, Ms. Gaen offered you three million yen to withdraw, right? Why did you refuse? In other words, why didn’t you withdraw at that point?”

“What, would you rather I had?”

“It’s not that, it’s just…” Senjogahara hedged, then said plainly, “Not knowing your intentions makes me anxious.” The woman could say the most horrible things without batting an eyelash–not that I didn’t understand where she was coming from. “Maybe you figured out some clever way to wangle more than three million out of this?”

“…”

I didn’t dignify that with a response.

“I’m sorry,” she relented immediately. “That was a horrible thing to say.”

What a pushover.

“Seriously though, how come? I’m grateful that you’re not giving up on the job, of course, but you see why it makes me anxious.”

“I don’t need to figure out a way to wangle more than three million yen out of this. Because I already did.”

100,000 + 3,000,000 = 3,100,000, more than three million yen.

“I guess you’re right.”

“I get the same amount whether I finish the job or not, so I’ll see it through. My logic couldn’t be more simple.”

“If the amount is going to be the same, don’t people usually call it a day?”

“That’s the logic of a child. Adults don’t abandon their work just like that.” My remark was meant to make me sound cool, but I felt miffed that opinions remain generally divided over whether swindling actually constitutes work.

Senjogahara’s sullen reply was, “Don’t treat me like a kid.”

“Anyway, don’t worry about Gaen-senpai. She won’t be an issue. She’s not the type to use force, even if I take her three million yen and don’t withdraw. She might put me under surveillance–” I said, the person who’d been tailing me in the forefront of my mind, “but I doubt she’ll bring her strength to bear on actively obstructing my con, my deception.”

“Really? You aren’t just telling yourself that because you want to believe that your senpai is tolerant and broad-minded? She’s all set to ruthlessly, cold-bloodedly stand by and watch as Araragi and I, and his loli slave, are murdered.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that Gaen-senpai isn’t as tolerant and broad-minded as I want her to be. Come on, we’re talking about someone who’d disown her own adorable junior over a little thing like, worst-case scenario, one measly town going up in smoke.”

“Well…”

It seemed as though Senjogahara was about to say something. Probably something like, *She doesn’t need an excuse to disown a junior like you,* but I imagine she realized it was a “horrible thing to say” because she didn’t finish her sentence.

Though maybe that’s just my persecution complex speaking.

In other words, maybe I, Deishu Kaiki, was more hurt by Gaen-senpai’s threat of disavowal than I was admitting–if so, I was somewhat pleased at having discovered a heretofore unknown side of myself.

“Well, I only know this Gaen person from what other people have told me, so I’ll just have to take your word for it. So she won’t bring her strength to bear on obstructing us…”

“I do. And.”

All of a sudden I became concerned about my cell phone’s battery. I hadn’t charged it since the new year began, so it could die during our conversation. Where was my charger… Had I thrown it away again?

“She’s not the type of person to give the same warning twice.”

“…”

“That’s why it’s weird. Then who the hell was the Cat’s Eye who broke into my hotel room and left me a letter with the identical message?”

“I don’t know, but it wouldn’t take a Cat’s Eye to leave a letter in your room while you were away.”

“Hnh?” Not taking her meaning, I let my honest reaction slip past my defenses. “What are you getting at? Are you saying the security at my hotel is too lax?”

No, Senjogahara didn’t even know the name of the hotel where I was staying. I didn’t think so, anyway… I hadn’t told her, had I?

“It’s not like hotel security is all that great to begin with,” she said. “The guests are free to come and go as they please…”

Fair point.

In luxury hotels you need a key card to operate the elevator, and it’s specifically keyed to your floor, but even then you can get around it easily. You just need to piggyback on someone else, the same way you’d get past an apartment building’s auto-lock.

“But even if it’s easy to get into the hotel itself, entering into somebody’s room is a different story. My hotel uses contactless key cards, so no chance of a duplicate key. If you wanted to get into someone’s room, you’d need an inside man on the hotel staff, or someone to access the computer system from outside–”

“Take it down a notch. I could do it, and I’m no Cat’s Eye, nor do I have some organization backing me up.”

“What’re you saying?”

“If it’s just an envelope, you could slide it under the door.”

“…”

I digested Senjogahara’s matter-of-fact words, added them up over and over again, and found no room for objection.

Upon consideration, it was definitely strange that the envelope had been lying in front of the bathroom. If someone had broken into the room, they’d have left it on the coffee table or something. In which case, the fact that the envelope was on the floor appeared to

be proof positive that Senjogahara's deduction was right on the money.

"How do you like that. It's a conclusion worthy of consideration."

It was more than that, it was almost definitely correct, but I maintained some outward diffidence. Or maybe I was just bluffing. No, forget maybe, I *was* just bluffing. What a pitiful adult, puffing himself up in front of a child.

Or maybe pitiless.

Miserable either way.

Senjogahara was so off-handed about it, and maybe I was blowing the whole thing out of proportion, but wouldn't most people suspect an intruder if they came back to their hotel room to find a mysterious letter lying on the floor?

It'd be one thing if it was right inside, but if the letter were thrust in forcefully enough to make it halfway across the room, who would connect it to the crack under the door?

It was at least a passable bluff.

"Which hotel you're staying at isn't that hard for anyone to figure out, either," Senjogahara let my bluff pass entirely.

What a saint.

"At least, it'd be worth the hassle for whoever wants you to give up on this job. That person tailing you is a concern…"

"The tail might have nothing to do with this, it could be connected to another matter."

"True, you've had your share of adventures in this town…though I'd be more concerned if it weren't related."

"Same old same old, I'm used to it. Don't give it a second thought." Naturally, I'm not tailed often enough to say *same old*

same old, but I figured I could give Senjogahara a little peace of mind.

Coming to me with this job was already anxiety inducing for her, and I just didn't have the heart to give her more to worry about.

"In fact I'd be grateful if it was the 'same old.' I don't want this nice, clean job to get complicated at this stage, which is why I called you. I thought you might have some idea who it might be."

"Unfortunately, no."

After all that build-up, Senjogahara's answer to my question was disproportionately plain. Even bland. So plain that if we were classmates, I'd be worried that she hated me. Well, she did hate me, of course.

"I haven't even told anyone that I hired you in the first place."

"Just because you haven't told anyone doesn't mean they couldn't find out. Maybe someone was listening in while you were talking to me in the hall at Araragi's house."

"No chance. But…I suppose Araragi could have figured it out if he secretly checked my cell phone?"

"Hey, hey. He's not the kind of guy who'd do that."

I surprised myself by saying this. So I had some esteem for Koyomi Araragi, which was unexpected. Though I doubt hearing that would please him one bit.

"No, he's not. You're absolutely right. And even if he caught on from the way I've been behaving, he wouldn't hide behind something as roundabout as an anonymous letter. He'd confront you face to face."

"Sure," I agreed readily. What the hell was going on? Was I an Araragi sympathizer or something? But even if I was, I could be mistaken. "Senjogahara. How would he actually react if he found out

not just that I'm involved, but that there's a light at the end of the tunnel? You've been totally preoccupied with keeping it secret, but what would he say if he did confront me face to face? Would he tell me to 'withdraw' too?"

"I guess so. Or no, I wonder…"

"You don't know?"

"Even I don't understand him completely."

That was like admitting defeat as his girlfriend, I thought, but then, women who claim to know everything there is to know about their boyfriends are infinitely more frightening, so Senjogahara was honestly in the right.

Well, I don't know, but at least she was honest.

I like honest people.

They're easier to con.

"Well, I'll look into it," I said, "just to be on the safe side… After all, unlike Gaen-senpai, whoever wrote that letter might try to interfere with my plan."

"Uh huh… It was handwritten, right? The letter?"

"Yeah, it was. It seemed as though any notable characteristics of the handwriting had been intentionally obscured."

"I see… But I might be able to glean something from it. It's already too late tonight, but maybe you could show it to me tomorrow?"

"Didn't you say you had no idea?"

"Just to be on the safe side."

"Your vigilance is appreciated, but…" I considered concealing the truth somehow but abandoned the idea because I knew Senjogahara

wouldn't buy it. I opted to give it to her straight instead. "It's impossible. I already tore up the letter."

"Wha…"

"I flushed it down the toilet, so there's no chance of piecing it back together."

"Why would you do that? It was important evidence."

"Evidence? I'm not the police. And you know perfectly well that I immediately dump anything that's annoying or unnecessary."

"Indeed I do. Given how you dumped me."

"How's that? I dumped you?"

"Slip of the tongue…" Senjogahara loudly clicked the tongue in question, then added, "I got confused for a second and thought I was talking to Araragi." I wasn't sure if her correction even worked as an excuse. If it was meant to hurt me, it was a catastrophic, nay, cataclysmic failure.

But I'd let it go.

Why torment a kid.

Evidence and police work aside, disposing of the letter had definitely been a bit hasty. Now Senjogahara must be wondering if there'd been any letter to begin with. She was entitled to a bit of sarcasm.

"Well, the letter was in my room, in other words it was meant for me. I'll take care of it as part of the job, so don't concern yourself about it or feel like you need to do something. Just go be with Araragi."

"No can do. Sure, I want you to do your job, and I'll leave that entirely up to you, but I still have to do my best."

Hmm.

That was more than just dedication, she was probably envisioning a situation where I “withdrew,” or betrayed her and ran away–most prudent.

Well, I wasn’t going to ask what she had cooking. And if she had other irons in the fire for resolving the situation, maybe I ought to dial back the frequency of my phone calls.

“By the way, Kaiki.”

“What?”

“Do you actually intend to make a hundred-day pilgrimage? That’s not a lie?”

“Nope. Okay, it’s not exactly true either. I don’t intend to climb those steps a hundred times. I’m no spring chicken. But I’m planning on going every day until the end of January.”

“Every day…”

“Which means my outlay will be around 300,000 yen. It’s a necessary expense, but the severance package I received from Gaen-senpai will more than cover it.”

The rest would go into my pocket. A hefty payout.

“Ten thousand yen a visit… That’s kind of like going to a hostess bar, isn’t it?” remarked Senjogahara, as if that were somehow disquieting, though her tone was perfectly level.

A hostess bar. For my part, I had likened Nadeko Sengoku to a gimmicky piggy bank–what a difference in sensibility. I was the over-thirty middle-aged man, and Senjogahara the current high school girl, so it was as if we’d traded our metaphors.

“To be honest, I’m kind of anxious about that,” she continued. “If you go every day, you might be seduced by Nadeko Sengoku. She might win you over to her side.”

“What, are you jealous, Senjogahara?”

I heard a click. Apparently that joke had been over the line.

It was probably a good thing we’d been speaking on the phone and not in person–if we had been at Mister Donut, I might have gotten a merciless dousing.

I thought about waiting for her to call back, but as the adult, I’d yield on this one. To top it off, the first words out of my mouth when I called her back were: “I’m sorry.” What a guy, if I do say so myself. Though there are few things in the world as unreliable as an apology from me.

“It’s no laughing matter.” Senjogahara didn’t explicitly accept my apology, but she let it go and restarted the conversation. “She’s a devilish one, that girl.”

“…Did you know Nadeko Sengoku before all this?”

“No, I think I told you, she was Araragi’s acquaintance, his friend. I’d never even heard of her until she became a god.”

“So how can you say she’s devilish? I got the sense that she was just a fool.”

A crazy fool, but still.

“Right, you mentioned that. But I think it’s precisely because I’ve never met her that I can make that judgment–I wasn’t sure what to think when you said you were going to see her once every three days, but I feel compelled to warn you. Think twice about visiting her every single day.”

“…”

Being warned to withdraw, being warned about visiting Nadeko Sengoku every day. It was a hell of a day for warnings.

Just to be clear–and this is a very important point–I cannot stand being warned, by anyone.

“Duly noted. I’ll take your kind warning into consideration. Perhaps you’re right, perhaps it’d be best not to go every day.”

“I just hope the snake’s venom isn’t addictive,” sighed Senjogahara, sounding like she knew it all.

Naturally I let it go in one ear and out the other.

We hung up without so much as a good night, and this time I plugged my cell phone into the charger, which I apparently hadn’t gotten rid of. Then, as a nightcap, I began to update my notes.

Day number three.

It had been a busy day.

Yotsugi Ononoki and Izuko Gaen. Nadeko Sengoku using a snake for cat’s cradle. My mysterious tail. Breaking and entering at the Sengoku residence, the closet thrown open to reveal its contents. And the letter dropped–no, slipped into my room. The phone call with Senjogahara.

I added illustrated versions of these events to my notebook, which took about an hour.

Then, turning the page, I decided to make my to-do list. The plan was in place, and with all the worrisome elements lined up neatly before me, now if ever was the time to do so.

☆ Hundred-day pilgrimage to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine (until the end of January)

☆ Vigilance re: the person tailing me (Vigilance Level 2)

☆ Investigation into the identity of the letter-sender (Necessity Level 4)

☆ Explore Gaen-senpai's motives (Low Priority)

☆ Avoid Koyomi Araragi (Top Priority)

☆ Avoid the Araragi sisters (Best Effort)

That about covered it, broadly speaking, I thought, before hastily adding:

☆ Buy cat's cradle

One day of using an ouroboros for cat's cradle was enough to last a lifetime.

The next few days passed in a humdrum routine of trips to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, where dwelt the ophidian deity Nadeko Sengoku–it'd be nice if I could say so at this point, but unfortunately, reality isn't that generous. Before I could begin my slow and steady progress, there was one more hurdle to overcome.

If it was even a hurdle.

The following day, January fourth. The New Year's holiday was over, and the world had more or less returned to business as usual. The first thing I did that day was go get some breakfast.

Come to think of it, I hadn't eaten anything since the trip to Mister Donut two nights prior. If I'm not careful, I forget to eat. Something is definitely wrong with how my brain processes hunger. Though maybe it's just that my appetite for money outweighs my appetite for food.

After enjoying the breakfast buffet at the restaurant on the first floor of the hotel (I love the atmosphere of the all-you-can-eat experience. Or maybe the all-you-can behavior itself), I returned to my room. Then I took my morning shower, and when the time was right, I set out. I thought about trying to seal the crack under the

door with tape, but if I started getting worked up over every little thing there'd be no end to it, so I gave up on the idea.

At the front desk, I asked, "Excuse me, is there anywhere around here that would sell a cat's cradle?" I figured somewhere like Tokyu Hands or Loft would have them, but despite the fact that those places sell literally everything, they have a mysterious tendency to lack exactly the things I happen to be looking for (given that they're big chains, maybe it's some kind of fraud-prevention effort). So I was being cautious.

But the concierge just said, "Hunh?" and cocked his head in confusion. It was no way to react to a guest, but I understood how he felt, so I said, "Never mind." I ended up making for Tokyu Hands after all. Even if they didn't have an actual cat's cradle, surely they'd have some string in the arts and crafts section.

I strolled down the main drag, keeping an eye on my surroundings just in case–in case someone was following me or watching me–but I simply couldn't tell. Perhaps someone was tailing me, perhaps nobody was.

Gaen-senpai wouldn't give the same warning twice, but there was a one-in-a-million chance that Ononoki might be lying in wait for me. Yet that didn't seem to be the case either.

Maybe she was off playing with Araragi at the moment. It hadn't been true when we met in the past, but nowadays she seemed to have become quite the liberated shikigami.

Good for her.

I guess we owe our thanks to Araragi for that.

I decided to do a little shopping. As long as I put another 10,000-yen note into the offertory box, I was pretty sure Her Snakeliness would rush out excitedly, saying, "Here's Nadeko!" But I think it was bothering me that Senjogahara had compared what I was doing to

visiting a hostess bar. I was buying some kind of offering just to emphasize that my trips to the shrine were devotional in nature.

Some kind of offering.

Fruit or flowers, the usual choice for a shrine, would only exacerbate the hostess-bar image, so I nixed that idea.

Was I being too uptight?

After giving it some thought, I decided to bring a bottle of saké, and succeeded in locating a decent liquor store. I figured most guys who were going after a girl at a hostess bar wouldn't pick a local saké.

You could also say I was just in a playful mood since I had money to burn.

Any ethical opprobrium that I was trying to get a middle school girl drunk would be off the mark here. She was no longer a middle school girl. She was no longer human.

She was a god.

They say no god can refuse a tipple, so in fact it would disqualify her from divine status if she didn't drink the saké, which in a certain sense would solve the whole problem.

I wanted to avoid being the jackass who upended the whole story by slipping and breaking the saké bottle on which so much was riding. I exercised the utmost care in climbing the snowy mountain path, and it was high noon by the time I arrived at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

It was grueling carrying a magnum of saké up that mountain.

I never wanted to do it again, but I had a feeling I was going to have to. Many times over.

I was about to put 10,000 yen into the offertory box when a thought struck me and I took out another 10,000-yen note. Twenty thousand yen altogether.

If 10,000 yen bought such an entertaining entrance, I was dying to see what 20,000 would get me.

Becoming free with my money the second I make an easy buck isn't great, but as far as I'm concerned money exists to be spent, so no big deal.

I slipped the 20,000 yen into the offertory box.

"H-H, here, eeek!"

Nadeko Sengoku dashed out from the shrine hall as vigorously as ever, but this time her agitation got the better of her and she went tumbling. She smacked her head on the corner of the offertory box so hard I thought she might be dead.

For better or for worse she was a god, so she got right back up, seeming relatively unhurt. She was unable to hide her agitation, however.

"T-Twenty thousand? M-Mister Kaiki, did you mean to do that? You know you can't have it back, right?!"

"…"

Apparently, Nadeko Sengoku was only comfortable with donations of up to 10,000 yen. Her position that, such limitations notwithstanding, money once put into the offertory box couldn't be returned was laudable. She was like a contemporary videogame arcade.

"It's fine."

"A-Are you paying for tomorrow in advance?"

“That’s just for today…and I brought this.” I placed the bottle of saké on the offertory box; I couldn’t get it to stand up on the uneven surface, so I lay it on its side. “A special treat for you.”

“Oh! Saké! Nadeko’s been wanting to try some!”

A real boozehound–unfortunately, she was a “god” after all. Though basically all monstrosities have a taste for alcohol, not just gods.

But something about the way she said it bothered me. Was it a craving carried over from her time as a human being?

“Dad only ever drank, like, beer, so this’ll be Nadeko’s first time drinking, like, saké!”

“…”

Roger. I wasn’t going to pursue it too deeply, but I got the impression that back when she was human, Nadeko Sengoku had been sneaking sips behind her parents’ backs.

The kind of people who would say, “She doesn’t look the type,” or, “That’s not like her,” had almost certainly driven her to her current state, so I didn’t feel like I could say anything. Not that I’m the kind of moralist who gets preachy over a bit of booze to begin with.

“Mister Kaiki, what’s the difference between beer and saké!”

“If it’s made from barley, it’s beer, and if it’s made from rice, it’s saké.” With this crude explanation I wrapped up that portion of the conversation and moved on to the next offering, or present. “I brought you this,” I said, handing Nadeko Sengoku the cat’s cradle. “Now you don’t need to use a snake. I got you a bunch of spares as well, so you can pass the time playing to your heart’s content.”

“Thanks! With this Nadeko can kill time until it’s time to kill Big Brother Koyomi!”

Because she always spoke in the same excited tone, it was hard to tell if the kid was actually excited, present-progressive. She was excitable, sure, but that could simply be because she was amped up, high, which is precisely why a sudden mention of killing Araragi, for instance, froze my blood.

I'm not a moralist, nor am I so fragile that I can't bear to see someone die, but that didn't mean I could remain calm in the face of such blithe deployment of the word *kill.*

Naturally my expression remained placid.

The two are totally separate.

"It's not just a way to kill time, Sengoku, cat's cradle is a deep, even profound pursuit."

I taught her some new tricks from among the ones in *A Cat's Cradle Compendium* that I'd memorized the day before.

I judged it best to stay focused on cat's cradle and not let the conversation drift for that day. We played for a few hours, then I said, "See you tomorrow," and left the shrine.

I could tell that Nadeko Sengoku was waving goodbye behind me, but ignored it. It wasn't like I'd swallowed what Senjogahara said, but I might as well exercise caution about being won over by Nadeko Sengoku's devilish wiles and not be too impatient in my bid to make friends with her.

I'd left behind the huge bottle, so the descent was a breeze. And then, when I reached the bottom of the mountain, it happened. I meant to keep my eyes out for anyone following me on the walk back to the station, but as it turned out there was no need.

Because there she was, in plain view.

Waiting for me at the entrance to the stairway that led up to the shrine.

Black and white.

She gave the impression of a mix between the two–no, I'm not claiming I got some insight into her inner self from a single glance, it was just a simple impression created by the girl's hair, a mixture of stark white and midnight black.

I naturally had no way of knowing who the hell she was, this girl wearing winter boots, with her rough duffel coat and earmuffs.

But I intuited from her brazen attitude, her total lack of subterfuge, that she was not my "tail" from the day before, nor the one who had stealthily delivered the letter to my room. I intuited this.

No–she made me intuit this.

"Hello, Mister Deishu Kaiki. We meet at last. My name is Tsubasa Hanekawa. I'm a classmate of Miss Senjogahara and Araragi's," she–Tsubasa Hanekawa, that is, said, bowing deeply to me, swindler that I am. When she bowed, she naturally took her eyes off me for a few moments, during which time I could almost certainly have dashed away to safety.

That's how much confidence I have in my speed.

Unfortunately, however, it wouldn't have been a sure thing on that snowy road, and, for some reason, I didn't feel like running away from this girl.

Which was rare for me–or virtually unthinkable, but standing before this girl, I couldn't imagine being so cowardly as to flee.

Even though I had never once in my life thought that fleeing was in any way cowardly.

"I'm…" I finally managed, "Deishu Kaiki–though it seems an introduction is unnecessary. I can only surmise that you've heard of me from Senjogahara or Araragi, am I right?"

“You are,” replied Hanekawa, raising her head with an earnest look.

Something about that expression, combined with her fine features, threatened to overwhelm me. In possessing an intensity beyond her years, she was not unlike Senjogahara.

Birds of a feather flock together?

Yet this was–

“But to be perfectly honest, I knew of you even before they told me about you. Having previously assisted the Fire Sisters with their investigation–”

“No need for a kid to speak so formally,” I cut her off. “You need to talk to me about something? I’ll listen. Please go ahead. I may have a few things I want to talk to you about as well.”

“…”

Brushing away a loose strand of hair with an “Mm,” Hanekawa said, “Fair enough, though perhaps this isn’t the place.” Her tone was still polite, which is to say it didn’t swing all the way to informal, but her attitude seemed to soften somewhat.

“There’s something I need to ask you first, though. Do Senjogahara and Araragi know that you’ve come to see me?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Ah.”

Every last one of them.

In my mind another player took the stage in the tale of the watch-fob and comb, but anyone trying to get in between those two lovebirds would be more like comic relief.

Who was I to talk, though, when my own role had to remain every bit as surreptitious as Hanekawa’s.

Two clowns standing by the side of a snowy road.

The thought even popped into my head that the two of us were in some sense birds of a feather ourselves.

“No skin off my nose, I couldn’t care less. I’m not going to rat you out, don’t worry. I have no intention of using your secret against you.”

“No need to spell it out, I’m not worried on that score,” Hanekawa stated with a wry smile. Her smile was also–how can I put this–roomy, expansive, capacious. Unfortunately, however, under that coat, I couldn’t gauge the size of those breasts Senjogahara had mentioned. “And from my perspective, our meeting doesn’t need to be such a closely guarded secret anyway.”

“Oh, no?”

I felt like I had missed an opportunity, but I supposed so. I began to walk along the snowy road.

“But then, I’m a pariah in this town. Got to keep my presence a secret. It might be best not to be seen with you of all people. By virtue of which I was thinking of hailing a cab, that okay with you?”

“Yes, it is,” Hanekawa assented without ado.

Never mind waiting for me out in the open like that, getting into a car with a swindler was beyond ballsy.

And also beyond my ken.

So much so that I, myself, shrank from the situation instead, but as the one to suggest it, I couldn’t back out now.

Hanekawa and I walked away from the mountain and found a taxi, skipped the train entirely, and headed straight to the shopping district. Maybe I was being too cautious, but this Tsubasa Hanekawa girl cut an overly conspicuous figure, so I don’t think I was.

If I were to be thoroughly security-conscious, I'd part ways with her temporarily and rendezvous elsewhere a few hours later.

Unlike Nadeko Sengoku, though, it seemed Tsubasa Hanekawa wasn't very aware of her "cuteness" or "beauty," for better or for worse.

"Yes, my hair really is conspicuous, isn't it. I'm sorry, when I was still going to school I dyed it black every morning, but what with winter break it completely slipped my mind."

She said this with a bashful air.

"…"

And during the ride, as we chatted idly and gossiped about nothing in particular, it struck me.

Maybe this girl hadn't been "doted on" while she was growing up. Maybe her parents had been strict, or laissez-faire.

It's not like we were discussing anything deep, so I couldn't say for sure, but the kid's oddly un-childlike attitude made me imagine such a past.

"I heard from Senjogahara that you were overseas at the moment… What was that about? Was she trying to keep us from interacting? In other words, was she lying to me?"

"Oh, no. It wasn't a lie," Hanekawa responded to the question that had been uppermost in my mind. "Or rather, Miss Senjogahara thought it was true when she said it. She and Araragi both think I'm still overseas."

"Oho…"

What in the world was this girl trying to sell, what kind of gift was she trying to give? It was a mystery. Aside from making contact with me, there was no reason for her to keep her return to Japan secret, was there?

“Yes… Well, at this point,” she went on, “it’s kind of a waste of effort, or a vain struggle for peace of mind. I’d hoped that such a feint might lead to a breakthrough.”

“A breakthrough…”

“Yes… I was pretty sure Mister Oshino wasn’t really overseas, so while I had a feeling it was doomed from the start, I thought maybe I could throw some sand if I left the country for a while. Or put up a smokescreen.”

“Sand–in whose eyes? Nadeko Sengoku?”

“Her too, but Ms. Gaen, mainly.” Having said so, Hanekawa seemed to catch herself and apologized, “Oh, I’m sorry, Mister Kaiki, for speaking like that. It’s rude of me when she’s your senpai. Pardon me.”

“She’s not my senpai anymore. Gaen-senpai disowned me.” I sounded ludicrous, persisting in appending the honorific. But I didn’t put an ounce of respect into the word in the first place. “So don’t worry about it… Right, I heard you’d gotten a direct warning from her. What can I say… That must’ve been tough.”

For a second I almost started apologizing to Hanekawa, but I realized there was no reason to.

Heheh, she chuckled. “I wanted her to think that I was on the wrong track…which is why I’m only back for a moment. I’ll be off again tomorrow morning.”

“Only back for a moment… You sure you want to be spending any of that precious time with me?”

“Yes, I am.” Hanekawa nodded emphatically. Funny, her saying so seemed to imbue our little tête-à-tête with some deep significance. “It might not mean much against the all-knowing Ms. Gaen, but if my overseas trip freed up Miss Senjogahara and made her get in touch

with you–then I'm glad. A happy accident, or should I say a happy according-to-plan? Mister Kaiki."

She looked me in the eye. I'd never met anyone who could look another person so squarely in the eye.

"Please save Miss Senjogahara, okay?"

Not for free, I won't, I declared, and began by making Hanekawa pay for the cab. She made a face like she couldn't believe her ears, but that was the extent of her protest, and she paid the fare with a credit card.

Seemed a little uppity of her to use a credit card when she was only a high school student, but these days you probably need one if you're going to go traveling overseas.

"Thank you very much," I said, getting out of the taxi.

Getting out after me, Hanekawa noted, "You're surprisingly decorous, aren't you, Mister Kaiki."

"Eh?"

What was she on about, I had just made her pay the cab fare. Did she mean "devious"?

"Oh, nothing. Anyway, where shall we go? Preferably somewhere where we can talk at our leisure without being seen."

Right. Having returned secretly to Japan, she had to sneak around, just as much or probably more than me, even if it wasn't under duress.

The Mister Donut Senjogahara had taken me to would work…but it might be too crowded during the day.

"We can speak back at my hotel, if that's all right with you," Hanekawa proposed. "The room was inexpensive, so I'm sure it's not where you're staying, but it's in this area too."

“I don’t mind, but are you–”

“It’s fine. I’m not finicky about that sort of thing, and anyway, I like to think I’m a good judge of men.”

Hanekawa smiled, and I had a mind to say something, but the more I argued, the guiltier I might feel, all on my own, so I thought better of it. Going to her hotel room probably looked better than going to mine, too.

But it takes a hell of a lot of swagger to tell a swindler to his face that you’re a good judge of character, so I had to take my hat off to her.

“You’re very frank–or open,” was all I said.

I fell in behind her, and she led us to her hotel, where I soon sat facing her across a narrow single room.

I said, “Should we order room service?”

“No…please don’t start ordering things on my tab. I may have a credit card, but that doesn’t mean I have a lot of money.”

“Oh, really?” She did tell me the room was inexpensive.

“I worked my fingers to the bone until I found a ticket so cheap that I couldn’t even believe it was legal, and I’m making my way around the world by taking advantage of as many discount tour packages as possible.”

“Wow.” I nodded.

I could brag about my Premium Pass 300 to blow her mind, but that wouldn’t be very mature, so I let it go.

Okay, not because it wouldn’t be mature. If I bragged about a card costing three million yen, such an erudite young lady might quibble, *Oh, but, since you could rack up 200,000 miles with that, if*

you converted it into Edy or into tickets, you'd get a much better bargain.

I'm not even imprudent with my spending, it's more of an easy come, easy go thing. I had no hope of getting the better of someone like Tsubasa Hanekawa, who strides firmly down the sunny side of the street and keeps out of the shadows.

In fact, working her fingers to the bone was like bragging to me. I almost wanted to pick a fight: people who lead decent, respectable lives need to realize that that, in and of itself, is deeply hurtful to people who don't lead decent, respectable lives.

"People who lead decent, respectable lives need to realize that that, in and of itself, is deeply hurtful to people who don't lead decent, respectable lives."

I picked it.

At which Hanekawa took off her coat and hung it in the closet. With a decent, respectable smile, she said, "Yes, that's one way to look at it."

I wanted to punch her in the face, but I wasn't sure I could salvage the situation afterwards, so I restrained myself.

"Listen, Hanekawa. You need to talk to me about something, and vice versa. I'm ready and willing to discuss those things, and very much want to, but before that, how about we sort out a unity of purpose?"

"Unity of purpose?"

"Yeah. 'Cause all kinds of people with all kinds of motivations seemed to be mixed up in this."

Not to mention my "tail" (a possibility), Gaen-senpai's "watchdog" (a possibility), and the person who wrote the mysterious letter (a certainty).

“For someone in my line of work, how people feel is important.”

“Uh huh,” Tsubasa Hanekawa, who of course knew that my line of work was swindling, gave a most, or the most, equivocal reply.

So what. If that was going to make me fold, I couldn’t call myself a swindler. You’re no good until you’ve had a million NOs thrust in your face.

“Which is why I want to know up front. Hanekawa, you’d prefer for Senjogahara and Araragi to be ‘saved,’ right?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Didn’t I just implore you to save her?”

“But to play devil’s advocate, maybe you want me to save them because you don’t want to save them yourself. By leaving it to somebody else, you get to double down on closing your eyes to the problem. Also, you might have gone overseas searching for Oshino just to get to him before Senjogahara and Araragi–to pull the wool over his eyes and make him not come back to Japan under any circumstances, or more directly, to ask him not to save them.”

“So you’ve managed to live this long being that suspicious of people,” Hanekawa said, turning a little pale. Just that level of mistrust was something of a culture shock for her, it seemed.

What a way to think of me.

What an honest life she must have led.

But being the grounded person that she clearly was, Tsubasa Hanekawa kindly came down to my level. “I want to save Miss Senjogahara and Araragi, but I don’t have to be the one to save them. I just don’t want them to die, so it doesn’t matter who saves them. It could be me, or Mister Oshino, or you.”

“Swear to god?” I asked.

Given that we were dealing with Nadeko Sengoku, this was meant to be arch. “Swear to cat,” Tsubasa Hanekawa replied with a straight face.

What the hell? Not an expression I was familiar with, but maybe it was some recent high school girl slang? Dammit, I’d fallen behind the times.

“Any questions on your part?” I ushered.

“Hunh?”

“Don’t you want to ask me about my perspective, how I feel? My client, at least, is terribly concerned. Don’t you want to know why I accepted this job from Senjogahara, or confirm that I intend to see it through?”

Even as I harassed her, I didn’t have a clever response lined up if she threw those questions back at me. If she actually asked me, “Well, why did you?” or “If I asked, are you going to tell me?” at that point, I’d have been at a loss for words. And who knows, I might’ve gotten pissed off and washed my hands of the whole thing.

Back to Okinawa, done with Hitagi Senjogahara and Nadeko Sengoku, and through with cold climes.

I might have told Senjogahara that an adult doesn’t just abandon a job, but that was yesterday, and this was today.

Hanekawa didn’t ask either question, though. She just smiled and said, “I’m not going to ask you anything.”

“…”

“Okay then, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get down to business–”

“Hang on. Why aren’t you? Are my feelings so transparent to you?” I ended up asking her instead, belligerently, more than a little annoyed, even though the girl was over ten years my junior.

But Hanekawa just kept on smiling. Stuck in a room with an older man who was trying to intimidate her, she showed no sign of fear.

“You don’t even need to ask, huh? You know everything, don’t you, missy.”

“I don’t know everything. I just know what I know,” Hanekawa replied, still smiling.

That shut me up. I was overwhelmed by those words, so reminiscent of Gaen-senpai–nope.

Not a chance. Hanekawa didn’t have Gaen-senpai’s oppressive aura.

And yet I’d been silenced. How can I put this, it felt silly, being so cautious, probing every intention; she’d suddenly put things into context.

“Fine…”

“I’m sorry?”

“Let’s get down to business. We’re exchanging information, aren’t we, Hanekawa? That said, you’ve got your own ideas about how to settle this, don’t you, quite apart from me and Senjogahara’s plan. I’ll give you the info you need for that–and you’ll tell me everything you know.”

And that’s how, at long last, I got a sense of what precisely had been going on in that town over the course of the past few months.

It was a more objective view than I could’ve gotten from Senjogahara, for sure. I learned in detail how Nadeko Sengoku had become a god, and about the harm her transformation had caused.

And what Gaen-senpai, what Izuko Gaen, had been doing there–even the half-vampire Episode had gotten dragged into it, the whole thing was just bananas.

Unfortunately, it'd be a stretch to say that Hanekawa got some useful information from me in return. That was unfortunate for her, of course, not me, so I wasn't particularly chagrinned.

Though our meeting wasn't too beneficial for Hanekawa, she didn't seem all that disappointed.

So grounded.

Enviable. Maybe.

Well, her position was that it didn't matter who saved those two as long as they were saved, so I guess providing me with useful info was enough to satisfy her.

"Hmm…" Having heard everything, I nodded. "I mean, here's the thing. From what you say, it's not because Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade came here that the town got screwed up spiritually, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade was drawn to the town because it was screwed up already."

"She didn't come right out and say it, but Ms. Gaen at least seems to think so–which is why she wanted to install a new god at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. And I guess when Araragi rejected her plan, an innocent middle school girl ended up with the job instead."

"An innocent middle school girl."

"What is it?"

"Nothing," I deflected Hanekawa's question with a shake of my head, since there was no point in discussing it. I asked her, "That reminds me, have you interacted with Nadeko Sengoku much? And if so, what was your impression of her?"

"Interacted…would be an exaggeration. We've met, but she's really Araragi's friend… So a friend of a friend. Plus she's a lot younger."

"Hmm."

A lot, no. A high school senior and a middle school second-year are only about four years apart, but I guess when you're in your teens, that seems like a huge difference. Sengoku probably seems like a kid to Senjogahara and Araragi and Hanekawa in the same way that they seem like kids to me.

"But you *have* met. Let's hear it, what was your impression of her?"

"Timid, or, bashful, or, shy, or, quiet…"

As Hanekawa started listing off the words, I thought, *Hunh, here we go again.* I'd already heard the same thing from Nadeko Sengoku's parents. I'd hoped Hanekawa might have a different take, given how she'd shut me up earlier, but the world wasn't such a convenient place, I shouldn't expect too much from a child.

But the inimitable Tsubasa Hanekawa proved me wrong. After pausing for a moment, she continued:

"…and so on and so forth, wasn't the impression I got."

Wasn't the impression.

"I'm sure that's what most people think when they see her… I'm not saying they're wrong, but the main impression I got was of being 'shut out.'"

"Shut out?" I cocked my head. "Like the other kids at school giving her the silent treatment?" I asked in clarification. The girl in the pics I'd seen definitely had the air of a kid who might be bullied–though now that she was a god, that vibe was totally gone.

"No, that's not what I meant. I felt as though *I* was the one being shut out. Me, and everyone else."

"…"

"That girl's world is hermetically sealed–nothing anybody says actually reaches her. Mister Oshino was very concerned about her,

too…but in the end, his concern didn't reach her either. She says she loves Araragi and apparently wants to kill him and Miss Senjogahara because of that, but at this stage I think it's safe to say that she doesn't really love anyone. She doesn't even see anyone besides herself."

"…"

Well, quite the keen insight.

Even so, it'd be a mistake to lay the blame on Nadeko Sengoku or to attack her on a personal level. It was everyone else's fault that she became who she was, her parents and everyone else who celebrated her as "cute cute cute," who treated her like a mascot.

But it wasn't like Hanekawa was blaming her for that, either, because she added, "I'd like to save her as well, if we can."

"Well, don't expect me to do that. Deceiving her is the job I signed on for."

"I'm aware of that. It's just my selfish hope."

"Araragi probably feels the same way, huh?"

"I imagine he does–but the problem at hand is her desire to kill him and Senjogahara. That's definitely got to be dealt with first. We don't have to rescue everyone in one fell swoop."

Her words were as rational as her desires were idealistic. Any teacher faced with a student like her would have a hell of a time.

Well, best of luck to them. I was here to do my job, and nothing more.

"But Hanekawa, if by rescuing her you mean turning Nadeko Sengoku back into a human being, think again. I'm pretty sure you haven't spoken to her since she became a god, but–she seems happy."

“Just because someone thinks they’re happy doesn’t mean they are.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. That’s what I think.”

Apparently. And obstinately. Could she be speaking from experience? She’d had her own run-ins with aberrations–she’d been bewitched, and maybe that was the lesson she took home from it.

If so, it was a valuable lesson.

She should take that lesson to heart, but she didn’t need me to tell her that. Tsubasa Hanekawa had clearly done so.

“Well, if that works for you, go ahead and think it. After I’m done pulling the wool over her eyes, feel free to jump in and save her.”

“What? That ups the difficulty level of my job, doesn’t it?” Hanekawa complained playfully. “I’d intended to take up the peripatetic life right after graduation, but I guess things aren’t going to go as planned…hmmm.”

“…”

Should I advise her to forget about imitating Oshino? I waffled a bit but figured I’d be overstepping my bounds and kept my mouth shut.

Never mind overstepping, it was simply no concern of mine. It’s every person’s right to decide what kind of life to lead–up to and including becoming a god, I thought, but no point in wielding that opinion at Hanekawa.

Instead I said, “I meet a lot of people like her in my line of work–people whose hearts are sealed shut. And yeah, you’re right, she definitely does ‘tune out’ everyone else. Ultimately, people like that think only of themselves… If you ask me, they deserve my deceptions.”

I delivered the villainous line in part so I could observe Hanekawa's reaction. I meant it, but I also exploited my genuine feeling to try and sound her out.

But Hanekawa just let it pass. "I was under the impression that no one's immune to your deceptions. Though all bets are off when it comes to a god… I want to ask you something, Mister Kaiki, but I'm afraid you might think it rude."

"What're you talking about? We're well past the point of worrying about being rude."

"Do you really think you can help her fall for it?"

"A strange way of putting it."

Help her fall for it?

That made it sound like an act of mercy, like I was kindly lying to Nadeko Sengoku for her own sake–ridiculous.

"I already told Senjogahara this, but duping that girl is going to be a piece of cake. Don't you worry, Hanekawa. I'm not one to put my seal on any kind of document, but that one has my full seal of approval."

"Okay… Great. Well, strictly speaking, I'm not concerned about that in particular. It's just…"

Suddenly Hanekawa became inarticulate. She started to say something, then thought better of it, then seemed about to speak again, then stopped again.

It drove me crazy. It made me want to force it out of her. Not that I'd ever get violent with a high school girl.

Then, although I have no idea whether it was what she'd been about to say, Hanekawa faced me and fired out of left field: "Mister Kaiki, will you tell me about Mister Oshino's family?"

Her question seemed totally unrelated to the matter at hand–or no, maybe she wanted to talk to Oshino's family because she needed to find him? That would be the right way to go about it–if the missing person was anyone other than Mèmè Oshino.

"He doesn't have a family."

"…"

"Neither do I. What about it?"

"No… Then, um…" Hanekawa searched for the right words. What, had she really pinned her hopes on Oshino's family? Because she was being wildly optimistic if she thought that drifter had anything like a proper family. "What about–a niece, for instance?"

"A niece?"

That came out of the blue as well. Needless to say, a niece would be his brother or sister's child… Oshino's brother or sister? Where did she get that idea? I told her the truth, at least to the best of my knowledge.

"He doesn't have any brothers or sisters. None. It's not that his family died, it's not that they're estranged–he's a man without a single relative, and he always has been."

"…"

"Something the matter?"

"No–um, Mister Kaiki. I'm willing to pay, so please don't tell anyone that I asked you about Mister Oshino's private life."

"Now, now, I can't condone that kind of bribery. Starting so young, god only knows what the future holds for you," I said, simultaneously thrusting out my right hand.

Without a word Hanekawa took a 500-yen coin from her wallet and laid it on my outstretched palm.

“Five hundred yen?”

“I’m sorry… That’s all the cash I have on me.”

“Fine.” I felt around in my pocket and handed her whatever I found there as change. It may well have been more than 500 yen, but if it was, so be it.

“What’s this?”

“Your change–plus a little extra for everything you’ve told me. Payment for services rendered.”

“I don’t want money–but I guess this isn’t an amount worth quibbling over.” Hanekawa counted the coins in the palm of her hand. “Your really are decorous, Mister Kaiki.”

“No such thing as a decorous swindler. I’m just serious, that’s all.”

As before, I didn’t understand what Hanekawa meant, but this time I’d been able to respond in kind.

Hanekawa and I continued to talk a while longer–until nightfall. It was just idle chatter, but chatter that seemed like it might prove useful in the future.

It was stuff I should have paid for in 10,000-yen bills, not small change, but that’d have really made me feel like I was at a hostess bar, so I held off.

I figured I might as well ask her if she had any idea who had left the letter (“Withdraw”) in my hotel room, but her response was, “I’m afraid not.”

Like she said, she didn’t know everything.

Ordinarily, I’d suspect that Tsubasa Hanekawa herself was my tail or the letter-sender, but strangely enough, my suspicion evaporated during the course of our conversation.

A rare event.

But not a first. For instance, about once a month I even go to sleep without suspecting that I might not wake up the next morning.

“But Mister Kaiki, after something like that, shouldn’t you change hotels?”

“Maybe…since I was only planning to stay there for a week to begin with. But the same thing might happen at whatever new hotel I check into. If I react too strongly, whoever it is might decide to push their luck.”

“Hm. I see your point.”

That being said, if I received another letter, I’d definitely consider switching hotels.

“Oh yes. Mister Kaiki…”

Incidentally, our little chat also included the following conversation.

“Araragi told me there’s a ‘sealed closet’ in Sengoku’s room. Whatever’s in it, she told even her ‘beloved Big Brother Koyomi’ that he ‘must never open it.’ You went into her room when you were at her house, didn’t you, Mister Kaiki? Did you look in there?”

“Nope.” Naturally, I kept my breaking and entering a secret from Hanekawa, just like with Senjogahara. I act in bad faith in any sort of negotiation. “A closet, you say? There’s one in her room? I didn’t notice.”

“I see.”

“What do you think is inside?”

“I don’t know. But if she’s that desperate to keep it secret, might it be something important?”

Nope. Just useless garbage.

I very nearly told her as much, but stopped myself on the brink. Strange, why did I almost tell her?

About that trash.

Now I can finally say *the next few days passed in a humdrum routine of trips to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, where dwelt the ophidian deity Nadeko Sengoku:*

The next few days passed in a humdrum routine of trips to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, where dwelt the ophidian deity Nadeko Sengoku.

I went there virtually every day, or literally every day, to play with her. “Play with” is terribly insolent of a worshipper, but that’s the most accurate description so what can you do.

I got pretty good at cat’s cradle, and we left the one-person stuff behind and moved on to two-person techniques. Nadeko Sengoku and I played endlessly.

I read, and memorized, many more books on the subject–we cat’s-cradled day in and day out, on and on and on, but even with all that practice Nadeko Sengoku couldn’t progress beyond a certain level (and, to be fair, neither could I).

Cat’s cradle is a deep, even profound pursuit.

We just couldn’t measure up to Nobita–even though we hit that wall, Nadeko Sengoku didn’t get sick of it like I did, she didn’t give up on it, she just happily kept on playing.

I brought her other toys (tops, blocks, basically anything you could play with for a long time that didn’t require electricity) to see if she was into them, and she was, but in the end we always returned to cat’s cradle.

Maybe it meant something to her, but no matter. Anything that helped me connect with her was okay in my book.

And, while I couldn’t do it every day, since Nadeko Sengoku seemed to have taken a shine to saké, I lugged a big bottle of it up to the shrine about twice a week.

I prefer Western liquor so I didn’t join her much, but she became a heroic quaffer of the Japanese stuff.

I hadn’t thought to bring her a cup or anything, though, thanks to which she drank straight from those enormous bottles. Outwardly (or at least size-wise, given that her head was covered in snake hair), she was a middle school girl–so her cradling a huge bottle in her little arms and chugging from it was, how can I put this, not something you see every day, a real sight for sore eyes. I’d gladly pay for the honor.

Nadeko Sengoku gave herself over to the most divine pursuit of guzzling booze like there was no tomorrow, but apparently being a god didn’t mean she couldn’t get drunk. When she was done with the saké, she was even cheerier than usual. This was naturally exhausting for me, and on such occasions I would depart early.

Every time, I’d tell myself never again, but I always ended up wanting another taste of her merriment. While I said about twice a week, I might have brought her saké pretty damn often.

And that was my life for a month.

Go up the mountain.

Pay 10,000 yen.

Have some fun with cat’s cradle, chat.

Imbibe on occasion.

There was no particular trouble, no one tried to get in my way–and a second letter never appeared in my hotel room.

Staying at the same place for over a month, just because no letter appeared, would have been suspicious, so I did move after the first week as planned–but nothing much changed at the new spot.

Every once in a while I sensed someone tailing me, but no big deal. Perhaps because I never tried to unmask them, they didn't take it to the next level–and who knows, it could be my imagination after all. Under the circumstances, it was entirely possible that it was just a case of nerves.

Other than that, nothing worth mentioning.

I suppose there was this one thing.

I'd heard from Hanekawa that there was–or strictly speaking, "had been"–an abandoned cram school where Oshino had holed up during his stay, and I went to visit it on a whim sometime around the middle of January.

Just a stark white expanse.

The building was gone and snow was piled up high–the place had caught fire in August or September of last year and burned to the ground.

The incident involved Gaen-senpai and Episode, as well as Koyomi Araragi and Shinobu Oshino–and was also an underlying cause of the present fix.

Because on that occasion, Araragi received a certain important item from Gaen-senpai that ended up turning Nadeko Sengoku into a god; Gaen-senpai, however, had wanted him to use it on Shinobu Oshino.

I wasn't there, so I don't know if Araragi made the right decision–which is to say, I don't care to know, or so much as think about it.

I'm not Araragi, nor am I Shinobu Oshino or Nadeko Sengoku, nor am I Gaen-senpai–in other words, that story has nothing to do with me. What Hanekawa had told me gave me some sense of Gaen-senpai's motives, but again, I wasn't interested at all in pondering whether they were good or evil, right or wrong.

While part of me hoped to find a clue to aid me in my current task, I basically went to the ruins, or the former site of those ruins, half out of curiosity and half just for the hell of it.

It wouldn't hurt to see where Oshino had spent his time–the building itself was gone, though, so I can't say I got much satisfaction on that account.

But there was an interesting coincidence.

The thing worth mentioning.

In that now-empty lot, I happened to run into a girl I know named Roka Numachi.

I'd met her elsewhere some years before–turns out, she was from this town. That seemed like a potentially useful piece of information. If I wanted to involve myself with Suruga Kanbaru somewhere down the line, for instance.

And so January came to a close.

They say that January jets, February flees, and March makes its getaway–and so thirty bills, I mean thirty days, were gone. Thirty-one if you include New Year's Day, when I got the call about the job.

My plans and records, and to-do lists, had ballooned to ten notebooks–to be torn up and thrown away once the job was over, but looking over them at night in my hotel room before going to bed filled me with this sense that "I'd worked," with satisfaction.

A swindler's fulfillment.

I spoke to Senjogahara on the phone throughout the month, but the meeting at Mister Donut was the last time we met face to face–I probably wouldn't be billing her for any further expenses, and if I could finish the job without us seeing each other again, that seemed for the best.

Hanekawa left the country on January fifth, the day after we met–though that might be untrue. Maybe she stayed in Japan or secretly returned right away, searching for Oshino or trying another approach. Whatever the case, I wasn't going to pay her too much mind. I had a job to do, and she could keep on doing things her own way.

I didn't get in touch with Mr. and Mrs. Sengoku again–and they didn't contact me. However the job turned out, I wouldn't have to deal with that law-abiding couple for the rest of my life.

Oh, also it came time for the national exams.

I never once ran into Araragi jumping the gun on visiting Nadeko Sengoku during the course of my "hundred-day pilgrimage," so I guess he'd gotten real about prepping for them.

By the by, according to Senjogahara, he sat for them properly, and properly failed to obtain good marks.

Made sense, since his life was on the line–at least he had an excuse. If I pulled off my grand deception of Nadeko Sengoku ("helped her fall for it," as Hanekawa put it), he'd have no excuse for his secondary exams. That provided me with some extra incentive to get it done. Assuming his low scores hadn't already put him out of contention.

And so January came to a close.

February began.

And the appointed day arrived.

“I see. So today’s the day, at last.”

“Yeah, at last is right.”

Before leaving the hotel, I placed an early-morning phone call to Senjogahara–winter break was over, and third term had begun. Which is why I had to call early in the morning–though Senjogahara, who was in her final year, didn’t actually have to show up every day.

She’s serious about the oddest things. A serious, odd girl is what she is.

“Is it going to be okay? I’m kind of tense.”

“Don’t be,” I said in a calm voice. Naturally, I felt a certain tension as well when I thought the job was coming to an end–to fruition. Remaining calm was the mature thing to do, though. “I’ll call you tonight to give my final report–all you have left to do is prepare for a celebratory toast with Araragi.”

“A toast…” I don’t know what was going on in Senjogahara’s head, but the words came out like a sigh. Not like the tension or strain was getting to her–she just seemed kind of listless. What was up with her?

Slightly concerned, I asked, “Did something happen?”

Had the circumstances changed this close to the finish line? That happens all the time, in fact. That’s work for you. It’s always, and I do mean always, right before the finish line that everything goes belly up.

“No…it’s just… Realizing that I’m only going to talk to you one more time after this makes me feel a little blue,” Senjogahara lamented, clearly insincerely.

Somewhat insulted that she thought she could fool me like that, I returned, “I feel the same way. Being in frequent touch with you

really brought me back, it was a real pleasure," with equal insincerity.

It was more like insensitivity in my case.

I wouldn't have been surprised if she hung up on me (It had happened plenty of times over the last month. I'd hang up on her, she'd hang up on me–how did we ever get to today without the job getting cancelled?), but Senjogahara just chuckled, "Heheh."

It gave me the creeps. She wasn't much of a laugher–or no, was that assessment two years out of date?

She was different now, more so than if she were a different person altogether.

"Of course I'll raise a toast with Araragi, but Kaiki, do I need to do something to show my appreciation? Should we meet one last time?"

"No need, lay off the bad jokes. Thanks to Gaen-senpai, I don't have to bill you for expenses and am coming out ahead, there's no reason to show me any gratitude… Oh, and this isn't a follow-up or anything, but Senjogahara."

"What?"

"Do you remember what we said at the beginning of January? Let me remind you just in case: give Araragi strict instructions. He might be busy right now with exam prep, but if he waltzes up to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine to see Nadeko Sengoku after I've duped her–everything will go to shit."

"Yeah, about that…" Senjogahara already seemed to have the issue in mind, and she sounded troubled. "It's gonna be a real problem. Leveling with him means fessing up that you were involved… It could make him that much more stubborn about going up to see Nadeko Sengoku."

“He’s your boyfriend. So if it comes to it, seriously, play up to him and persuade him with some line about just doing it for your sake, or having to choose between you and her.”

“Don’t you get it? If I could, my life wouldn’t have turned out this way.”

Fair enough. But with their lives on the line, couldn’t she pull together such a performance, even if it was hard?

“It’s not an issue of can or can’t. Even if I did, Araragi wouldn’t buy it. I’m an excellent performer, but if I do that out of nowhere, it’s going to seem blatantly unnatural.”

“Sure. So don’t do it out of nowhere. Just like I spent all of January buttering up Nadeko Sengoku, take February to butter up Araragi.”

“Butter up…” echoed Senjogahara, disgustedly. “Any relationship is just a game to you, I take it.”

“I don’t play games,” I denied without a moment’s hesitation, but depending on how you looked at it, our conversation itself was a sort of game. I’d groomed myself to be someone who couldn’t be gamed, but that didn’t necessarily mean I didn’t play games. “Anyway, at this point the time constraints have been lifted. If you want to rescue Nadeko Sengoku, it’s not too late to do it once you guys are in college.”

I was of course keeping my meeting with Hanekawa secret from Senjogahara, but I had her words in mind as I continued, “So if you really can’t persuade Araragi, then dream up any old reason for him not to go near the mountain. Your lives depend on it, so get it done.”

“You’re right… Our lives depend on it.”

Yes. Senjogahara’s life was on the line, and so was Araragi’s–whatever she tried, it wouldn’t be in bad faith.

Or would it? Should lovers keep no secrets for any reason?

I had no idea. I really didn't.

"Hey, Senjogahara, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"What do you love about Araragi?"

"That he isn't you." Maybe she thought this was clever and sarcastic, but the basis for her selection of a lover seemed to be centered on me, if only via a process of elimination, and she corrected herself: "Because he's Araragi. If Araragi wasn't Araragi, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have fallen in love with him."

"You've lost me," I said. "You're so passionate about him, so into him you're willing to sacrifice your life on his behalf, but I bet you'll break up when you get to college."

"…"

"Or maybe once you graduate from college. High-school couples don't usually make it all the way to the altar. It's just bullshit puppy love."

"I'm going to let that one slide… Even I'm not so reckless as to pull the rug out from under everything at this point. But will you at least tell me why you're being so mean?"

I was genuinely surprised to hear her respond with such an admirable attitude instead of a retort. And since she'd asked, why was I being so mean to a high school kid?

Whether it was puppy love or not, if they were enjoying themselves, then wasn't that good enough? Why was I throwing shade on their romance?

Wasn't it like telling a kindergartner playing house in the sandbox, "Married life isn't really like that"?

I was ashamed of myself, so I cut the conversation short without addressing her question.

“Anyway, congrats. I’m glad you and your beloved Araragi will make it through this in one piece.”

“Aren’t you being a little hasty? Or do you just have that much confidence in yourself? If something goes wrong today then the whole thing has gone wrong. You can’t possibly think you’ve already succeeded?”

“I can.”

Running the simulation in my head one more time, I felt even more confident than before that convincing Nadeko Sengoku would be a piece of cake. I wasn’t letting my guard down, and I guess I was kind of tense, but there was no need to tell Senjogahara.

“Don’t worry. By the time you get home from school, everything will be taken care of.”

“I see… Well then.” I assumed that meant she was about to hang up, but Senjogahara kept on talking. “Saying this after you’ve succeeded, after you’ve saved me, would be nasty, so I’m going to say it now, if you don’t mind.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t start feeling too good about yourself just because you’ve saved my life.”

“…”

“I mean, of course I’ll be grateful, of course I’ll thank you, and if you change your mind and want more money, I’ll pay. I’ll do whatever you say. I just don’t want you to think that this means I’ve forgotten about what you did to me. Because I’ll hold it against you for the rest of my life. I’ll always detest you. And h-hate you.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded, but only ambiguously. Why was she stating the obvious? Was it really something that needed to be said for the record?

I didn't get her.

At all.

Though upon reflection, she'd been this way ever since I'd known her.

"And the promise is still in effect," she reminded. "When this is over, you'll never set foot in this town again. Don't ever let me, Araragi or me, see your face again."

"Sure, I've never broken a promise," I maintained.

To which Senjogahara replied tonelessly, "That's right, isn't it. You've never once lied to me, not now, not ever."

I hung up, then checked out of the hotel and walked outside. My luggage had proliferated considerably as I went about my business, what with the notebooks and changes of clothes, so checking out empty-handed wasn't an option. I left pulling along behind me a rolling suitcase I had acquired.

There was no way I was going to drag the damn thing up that mountain, though, so I left it in a coin locker at the station. Or maybe coin locker is an outdated term–since I locked it using the chip in my cell phone.

Either way, since I was going to dispose of almost everything in the suitcase after the job was done, I probably could have gotten rid of it all right then, suitcase and all, but you never know what life is going to throw at you.

The teachers at school always used to say, "You're still on the field trip until you get home," which is more than just cautious and a little pathological, but there's something to it.

And so I took one other precaution before going to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine that day–like I said, you never know what life is going to throw at you. And boy was I right about that.

After I put the suitcase in the locker and got on the train to that town–I'd missed rush hour, so it was empty–during that very trip, a little girl sat down next to me.

It was the shikigami Yotsugi Ononoki.

"Yaaay," she'd said, flashing a sideways peace sign.

Expressionless as ever.

"What now?" I asked, facing straight ahead without so much as a glance at the girl beside me. "I thought Gaen-senpai disowned me."

"Well, it was only ever Ms. Gaen who cut ties with you, not me. You'll always be Big Brother Kaiki to me, nothing can change that."

"Change it, already." *Call me Kaiki.*

Okay, okay, she said, then went on impassively–exceedingly, and extremely, impassively–"But, so, you really do intend to defy Ms. Gaen. I thought, and hoped, that you'd change your mind at the last minute…"

"Are you sure Gaen-senpai didn't send you?"

"Hunh? Definitely not. I'm just going to play with Le Monstieur."

"…"

Was that another nickname for Koyomi Araragi? Not bad at all, for Ononoki.

"He always pampers me. Anyway, it's just a coincidence that I happen to be sitting next to you like this, Kaiki."

"Hell of a coincidence. The world's a funny place."

"Yup. It's funny all right. Downright hilarious."

I mulled things over.

Ordinarily, I'd suspect that she'd been ordered to come and issue a final warning, by Kagenui maybe, if not Gaen-senpai.

But maybe it was a coincidence.

Under any other circumstances I'd never believe it in a million years, but just this once I did.

Alternately, perhaps Ononoki, the corpse *tsukumogami* who supposedly had no will of her own to speak of, had come to warn me for her own reasons.

Which was impossible, but also, why not.

"Three million yen. Doesn't amount to much in return for defying Ms. Gaen, I have to say… It's going to get harder for you in the biz, Kaiki, even if that's not what Ms. Gaen intended."

"Life isn't a free ride. I've often thought that my life is cheap, but a free ride, never."

"…"

"Even Gaen-senpai has enemies–I'll work my magic on them and ride things out for a while."

"Is someone else's girlfriend that important to you?" An odd thing to say–I guess hanging out with the wrong crowd warps your personality. "Someone else's girlfriend–and your former woman?"

"Seems like you've got the wrong impression. Not that I care to correct you."

Best to let people's misunderstandings be. An aberration's too, for that matter.

Ononoki, wrongheaded as she was, ran with her misunderstanding. "It's not like you, Kaiki. No good can come of

doing things that aren't like you. It's not like you haven't made the same mistake before."

"…"

"Oh, but maybe it's not so unlike you after all–two years ago, was it? You bankrupted a pretty large-scale religious organization with your scams."

"…"

"I remember because I was made to help, if only indirectly. Wasn't that for Senjogahara's sake, too? Her mother had fallen for a shady religion, or rather it had entrapped her mother, and you put them out of business even though you didn't get much money out of it. For that girl's sake, yes? Though in the end, her mother just transferred her allegiance to another group one step up the ladder, and nothing actually got solved."

"Don't go getting any funny ideas… It just happened to come to my attention in the middle of a job that this religious organization was trying to take a cut of my earnings, so I did what I had to do. But it's true that I didn't get much money out of it, and you can think whatever you like. It doesn't do me any harm to be thought of as a good guy. As a business venture, the whole thing was a bust."

"And is this time going to be any different? That's what Ms. Gaen's really worried about. Not some no-name town she has no ties to–it's you that she's concerned about. You doing something else that's not like you."

"I don't care for such a patronizing attitude, not from such a patron."

"You tore apart the Senjogahara household–and backed her parents into a corner from which divorce was the only way out–because nothing else was going to work, right? You judged that

their only daughter would have no future if you didn't cut her mother off from the family."

"Uh huh, that's right. That's exactly right, I was actually a stand-up guy. A real sweetheart, just looking out for a kid. I was only putting on a show of being nefarious. You've got all the details, don't you? You're really well informed. But don't tell anyone, okay, it's embarrassing."

"That was a bust too… You didn't understand a daughter's feeling for her mother."

"You're right, you're riiight, I really didn't get it back then, did I? Gotta be careful not to make the same mistake again. Well, life goes on, I'm going to try to do better."

"Is that the sort of guy you are?"

"Yup. I'm that sort of guy."

"Maybe you just don't know what you're doing."

"Does anyone know what the hell they're doing? Do you even know why you're talking to me and telling me this?"

"You've got a very high probability of success. It should be a snap for you to dupe Nadeko Sengoku. Generally speaking. But–you always fail in these instances. You always have failed."

"…"

"At least Ms. Gaen seems to think so…and that's all I have to say."

"I see," I replied curtly. I didn't have much of a reaction, didn't tell her what I thought of that.

I spent the rest of the train ride listening to her talk about Kagenui's recent exploits–sounded like she was the same as ever. Marching to the beat of her own drum, same as ever.

The first time I met Hitagi Senjogahara–two years ago, in other words–I thought to myself, *What a fragile-seeming kid.*

Of course, back then Senjogahara was afflicted with her mysterious ailment, which is why her devout mother had summoned me, flying the flag of the ghostbuster as I was. But even without the ailment business, I thought she seemed "fragile."

That impression hadn't changed.

Fragile.

Even now that her ailment had been cured, even though she had a boyfriend, even though she had turned over a new leaf–she seemed "fragile." If Nadeko Sengoku was a "broken" girl, Hitagi Senjogahara was a "breakable" girl.

Fragile, on the edge of fragmentation.

Which is exactly why her current self was a miracle. A mysterious ailment followed by a miraculous achievement–for someone who seemed so breakable to make it so far without ever breaking, not two years ago, not now, for eighteen years–

The mother broke.

But the daughter didn't–whatever the future might bring, at least right then, at that moment, she would not break.

Because I was going to hoodwink Nadeko Sengoku.

"Here's Nadeko!"

As I inserted a 10,000-yen bill into the offertory box, Nadeko Sengoku made the same entrance she'd made every day for the last month–at this point I was tired of her funny pose, a little fed up with it.

At the same time, when I thought that I'd never see her again, I felt strangely wistful.

No, hang on. Although I did go and check out of the hotel, since I'd told her it would be a hundred-day pilgrimage, shouldn't I actually visit for another seventy days? If I pulled an Irish Goodbye right after feeding my lie to her, the perceived reliability of the info might plummet.

Hmm…maybe not another seventy days, but how about thirty–whoa, whoa, whoa.

As if I was really reluctant to say goodbye to Nadeko Sengoku. As if I'm the type who doesn't know when to pull out, to bow out…

Definitely best to call it quits today.

Sure, it might be better to keep visiting, but the more contact we had, the more likely that my lie would be exposed. And once she heard the shocking news that her "beloved Big Brother Koyomi" had died before she could lift a finger, I'd immediately become irrelevant, no doubt.

"Wow! Ten thousand yen, ten thousand yen!"

"…"

I was somewhat tired of Nadeko Sengoku's eccentric behavior, but she evidently wasn't tired of a 10,000-yen offering, and rejoiced as always.

Well, loving money is good and honest.

At that point, though, the total was over three hundred thousand yen, so she was quite an expensive woman–

I couldn't just get down to business right away, so I spent a while playing at cat's cradle and feeding her saké as usual.

Then, just as I was looking for an opening, Nadeko Sengoku struck: "Oh yeah! Mister Kaiki!" The bridge shape I'd been making with the string in my hands collapsed, but Nadeko Sengoku plunged ahead without even noticing. "It's about time, let's hear it!"

I had no idea what she had in mind–a new cat's cradle technique? I'd shown her all the ones I knew, that well had run dry…

But that wasn't what Nadeko Sengoku was talking about.

What she was talking about, what she was demanding to hear, was my dear wish, for which I was willing to perform a hundred-day pilgrimage.

"Right…my wish."

"Yeah! It seems like Nadeko's just getting a bunch of money, and that's not fair! Nadeko only just became a god, so who knows if I can grant your wish, but come on, Mister Kaiki, at least say what it is!"

"…"

Ouch. I'd forgotten about it. I hadn't even thought about it–having put it off for so long, not intending to complete the pilgrimage in the first place, I was stumped. Did I say something about commercial prosperity? I never should have. There was no way I could tell her the particulars of my business.

I felt like she'd found the chink in my armor–what to do?

Still empty of ideas, I said, "The thing about wishes is that they can't come true if you share them with someone," just to keep the conversation going. Inside, I was working feverishly to find a way to weasel out of my plight, though I'm sure I displayed no outward change.

"Huh?" Nadeko Sengoku cocked her head. "What d'you mean?"

"You'll be the one to decide how things are done here from now on, but–in the case of New Year's shrine visits, for example, your wish is something you don't tell anybody. If you do, it can't come true."

"Why won't your wish come true if you tell it to somebody?"

“Because words can’t be trusted.” I bet there’s a more pious explanation, but I decided to go with my pet theory–unprepared as I’d been for Nadeko Sengoku’s surprise attack, I’d use it as an opportunity to get down to the real reason for my visit. “The second you say it out loud to someone, it deviates from your true feelings. All words are lies, it’s all a scam. No matter how true, the moment you utter it, it becomes embellished. Words are only representations, so impurities find their way in. If you want to make a wish, to make it exactly as it is, you absolutely mustn’t say it out loud.”

“Okay, but,” she asked confusedly, “how can Nadeko grant your wish without knowing what it is? Plus, Nadeko’s talked out loud about her wishes a whole lot.”

Got her. I’d been afraid she might miss the point I was nudging her towards, but apparently she was at least that clever. Maybe she was smarter than a ladybug, after all.

“Nadeko’s been talking all along–about killing Big Brother Koyomi, and that person who’s his sweetheart, and the one who’s his slave.”

“Yes, you have. Which is why…” I mustered all the artistry and embellishment at my command to speak the false, empty words I’d prepared for her. “That wish won’t be granted. You talked so much about it, it can no longer come true.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s what I need to talk to you about today. That’s what I’ve come to tell you. The people you want to kill, Koyomi Araragi, and Hitagi Senjogahara, and Shinobu Oshino–they all died last night in a car accident.”

Nadeko Sengoku’s eyes widened in surprise.

The eyes of the hundred thousand snakes on her head also widened–then.

With an enchanted smile, she said, “You, too, Mister Kaiki? You’d trick ‘me.’”

I had done an impeccable job. That, at least, I can say with confidence. I’d climbed the perilous mountain path to that shrine every day for a full month, gingerly laying the groundwork for today.

But Nadeko Sengoku saw right through my lie, which meant she’d never trusted me in the first place, not even a tiny bit.

She hadn’t believed in me.

She hadn’t been suspicious, but she hadn’t believed in me.

So I hadn’t deceived her at all–in a sense, you could say that she was the one who’d fooled me.

Intellectually speaking, in terms of smarts, duping Nadeko Sengoku should have been a piece of cake. Comparing her to a ladybug might be going too far, but pulling one over on her should have been easy, for a con artist.

But it wasn’t. I ought to have given more weight to the emotional side of things–I hadn’t intended to take it lightly by any means, but nevertheless, I hadn’t realized just how closed off the girl’s heart really was.

Not the darkness in her heart–her heart of darkness.

She shut out everybody else.

Too late, Hanekawa’s words reverberated through my mind. I’d thought that a month of cat’s cradle and almsgiving and saké had amounted to at least a modicum of credibility, but I was a grand fool to believe that I’d won Nadeko Sengoku’s trust.

I may have been her very first believer–but she didn't believe in me, not for a second.

Neither trusting me nor doubting me–I was just me to her.

It brought to mind the snake she'd made into a cat's cradle. The ouroboros, eating its own tail–the snake that only engaged with itself.

"Such…liars. It's everyone–lies, all the time–"

Ssssss.

Sssssssssssssss.

Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss.

The mountain on which Kita-Shirahebi Shrine sat underwent a sudden serpentine transformation–no, I'm making it sound as if the mountain itself became one giant snake, like in a myth or folktale. That's not what happened, but it's the best way to express how it felt.

Countless white snakes started pouring forth from the precincts of the shrine, from the main hall, from within the offertory box–from beneath boulders, from the snowbanks, from behind trees, one after another, en masse.

Like light piercing the dark.

Like light swallowed up by darkness.

An endless stream of snakes began to appear seemingly out of thin air–a hundred thousand had been nothing. Snakes of every conceivable size blanketed everything, as white as the carpet of snow but far too numerous to be hidden by it.

Snake after snake after snake after snake.

In the blink of an eye everything was rendered invisible–the main hall of the shrine, the torii, the ground, the trees, the grass, absolutely all of it was buried in snakes.

Just one thing was barely visible.

The figure of Nadeko Sengoku–no, she was more snake than any of them.

My field of vision was filled exclusively with snakes.

Amidst it all.

Nadeko Sengoku–still wore her enchanted smile.

“Urk…”

We had far transcended anything on the level of gross or scary. This was something else entirely, and while some people might be upset by the comparison, it reminded me of the time I went scuba diving in some ocean somewhere. Yeah, this was a lot like being confronted with a coral reef stretching out before me in all directions. It was overpowering. I found it…

“Beautiful–”

The mass of white snakes began winding themselves around my body relentlessly, as a matter of course, even slithering out of my clothes. White snakes poured forth from everywhere, from nowhere, until I half-expected them to start emerging from my mouth.

I call myself a ghostbuster, fraud and imposter though I may be, and in that capacity I have witnessed many and varied oddities.

Urban legends, the word on the street, secondhand gossip–I’ve had my experiences with them.

Senjogahara’s ailment had been a part of that, so it’s not as if I was completely unprepared for this eventuality.

Even without Gaen-senpai's warning, Ononoki's worries, or Hanekawa's misgivings–I'd considered what might happen if I failed.

Despite my confidence, I am well aware that, in this world, anything can happen–for instance, no matter how flawless my preparations, there was always a chance that someone (be it the person tailing me or anyone else) might interfere.

So it's not as if I wasn't braced for the possibility that Nadeko Sengoku might fly into a frenzy–deeply skeptical as I am, I'd never be caught with my pants down.

Yet her "frenzy" was so off the charts that any such mental preparation was rendered meaningless. A total whiteout caused by a blizzard of snakes was news to me.

I couldn't even determine whether the snakes were real or illusory–and the most terrifying thing about Nadeko Sengoku's "frenzy" was that she wasn't actually in a frenzy at all.

She was in her normal mental state and had brought all this on without the slightest emotional upheaval.

She wasn't even angry about my lies.

Since she'd known from the beginning.

"Really, all lies, really, all lies, really, all lies–society, the world, this world, it's really really really really really really all lies lies lies lies lies–"

The innumerable snakes around her leapt–danced.

In time to her words.

Forget the mountain turning into a giant snake, it felt like the horde of them had surpassed the mountain in volume.

I was keenly aware that the strategy (if you could call it one) I'd had in mind in case of "failure"–the violent and forceful measures,

the crude methods for defeating Nadeko Sengoku–had gone up in smoke.

Damn.

This was bad.

A perfect illustration of the expression *out of hand.*

Senjogahara, and Hanekawa as well, were searching for Oshino like they thought he could take care of any situation, like he was Superman or something, but–I don't think he would've been of any use, either.

It made sense that Gaen-senpai had "withdrawn," even though her original plan to install Shinobu Oshino as the serpent deity had gone awry–this girl's animus, her mindset.

Maybe it transcended even that of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, the legendary vampire whose parameters were supposed to be off every chart.

"Really, such–a liar!"

"Ha. Who're you talking to?" I spat, snickering.

I couldn't believe myself. What a front I was putting up. But even considering that she was a child, that she had only just become a god, Nadeko Sengoku branding me a liar at this late date felt so immature.

I couldn't help but snicker, and snigger.

"And what are you talking about–you say that like you've never told a lie yourself. Seriously, you've been deceiving everyone around you all this time."

"…"

Nadeko Sengoku's smile was unwavering.

My words weren't reaching her.

And if they couldn't, then no wonder I couldn't fool her–in a sense, she'd been deceiving herself all along, so there was no room for my deception to take root.

Which is why my last-ditch criticism was so pathetic. Maybe I was the one who was childish, desperately acting cool even as the weight of the snakes blanketing my body threatened to bear me down and crush me.

"I may be a liar, but you're an even bigger one. Killing the person you love? That's so clearly fucked up–you've pretty much gone full humpty dumpty."

Finally I could begin telling it like it was, but that also spelled the end for me. It was the last resort, the final weapon in my arsenal, wielded in desperation…but it might as well have been an instrument of suicide.

"Stop lying about loving Big Brother Koyomi, about being in love with him. You just hate him. You're just angry at him, aren't you? Don't you loathe and despise him for taking someone else as his lover, for not liking you best of all? Then you should just say so, but instead, because you don't want to be that kind of person, you say you 'love' him, right? Ultimately, it's not Koyomi you love, but yourself. The only thing inside you is narcissism."

Only narcissism.

Only self-love.

Shut up tight inside her solitary world.

Which is why neither I, nor Oshino, nor Gaen-senpai, nor Araragi could've rescued her.

No one could save her.

To put it plainly, it's like Oshino's been saying ever since we were at school–people can't save other people, they just go and get saved on their own.

As she was, happy and filled to the brim with narcissistic love–not to mention well past the brim with snakes–Nadeko Sengoku had saved herself long ago, and there was no room for anyone else to step in.

"You could never grant anyone's wish. Because no matter how much you play at being a god–even if you really are a god, ultimately you only care about yourself. You believe in nothing and no one but yourself–how could you ever be sensitive to other people's feelings, to their beliefs?"

What gave me the right to say this?

What the hell was I even saying?

If I had the time to run off at the mouth, shouldn't I be using it to beg for my life? Whatever action I might take, whatever promise I might make, things were pretty much already over and done with.

At a single sign from Nadeko Sengoku, the myriad snakes arrayed across the grounds, disarrayed across the grounds, would sink their fangs into my body–and their poison would run its course.

Poison against which even the immortal vampire Koyomi Araragi didn't stand a chance.

A normal human like me? I didn't even stand half a chance.

No, against me, Nadeko Sengoku might not even need to use poison. She could crush the life out of me with nothing more than the weight of the endless horde of snakes endlessly propagating around me.

My body was already groaning with the weight of the ones wrapped around my head and shoulders, and I couldn't take much

more. I've heard that snakes coil themselves around small animals and crush their bones before swallowing them whole–and that seemed to be pretty much what was happening here.

Which is why I should have said something.

Like "forgive me" or "let me off the hook" or "I'm sorry" or "I was wrong"–I should have abandoned my pride and dignity as an adult, maybe prostrated myself before her with my forehead to the ground, and sincerely repented for my attempt to deceive her.

Ashamed of my insolence, my ignorance, I should have begged her–to spare me.

"You're foolish. And stupid. I thought you were crazy, but you're not. You're just immature and childish, that's all–you're that all-too-common type of pain in the ass who thinks only of herself. Do you think you're special just because you became a god?"

But I didn't. Instead I just hurled more criticism at her. My apotheosis as a contrarian.

Why didn't I beg for forgiveness, when I clearly should have? Probably because I couldn't forgive Nadeko Sengoku.

I couldn't give her a break.

Because–I didn't want to be spared by someone like her.

Never, not by her.

"…they hate Nadeko," she said with her smirk intact on her face, confined to her own little world that my words couldn't even begin to reach. "They hate 'cute brats' like 'me.' Uhh, who said that… Who was it… Big Brother Koyomi?"

"…"

Araragi would never say that to a younger girl, even if she was a god, not in a million years. If anyone actually did, it had to be Senjogahara.

Just as I was grousing at Nadeko Sengoku here in this life-or-death situation–Senjogahara had probably turned her acid tongue on the girl.

I knew all too well how sharp that tongue could be–hell, it was none other than myself who had helped her sharpen it, so I understood perfectly.

But more than anything.

It wasn't about Senjogahara's tongue, sharp or acid–even without the whole Araragi thing, she'd plain old hate the girl.

So I understood perfectly.

"But what am I supposed to do?" asked Nadeko Sengoku.

"…"

"Sure, I'm a 'cute brat,' but that's basically not my fault, is it? Even if people hate me, there's nothing I can do about it, is there? I hate this me too–but it's me, my own self, so there's nothing I can do about it."

"…"

"I'm not narcissistic. I don't love myself. It's true that I only think about myself, and I only believe in myself, but–I hate myself too," Nadeko Sengoku shared. She was giggling weakly the whole time, and it was hard to tell how serious she was being. "Still, that self is me, so I have to learn to like it. I have to become someone who can love her own hated self, any kind of self–like a god."

"R–"

I started to say, *Right.*

Just to humor her, to be her little yes man. But I couldn't bring myself to do it.

The weight of the snakes all over my body was finally too much for me, and I fell to my knees.

With an unpleasant squish.

Since there were snakes beneath my knees as well.

"R–wrong."

"…"

"Cut out the pretty excuses. I've heard what happened, it was just happenstance that you became a god. It's not like you wanted to become one. You didn't put any effort into becoming a god. You didn't become one because it was what you aspired to be. Or am I wrong?"

"I did…not. It wasn't what I aspired to be, no. Ahaha, I mean, that's, well, that's true, but–"

"It was a totally random occurrence–or more like a freak accident. So don't act like you put a lot of thought into it or something. Maybe you're happy now, I think you probably are, but it's like you won the lottery on a ticket you bought on a lark. No, not even one you bought, that someone gave you as a present."

Ultimately, I said.

So close to the final buzzer–I continued provoking Nadeko Sengoku.

"Ultimately, even at this point, even now that you're a god, you're still dancing to someone else's tune, just like you were when you were human. Back then you were put on a pedestal for being 'cute, *cute*'–and now you're being put on a pedestal for being 'a god, *a god,*' but that's the only difference."

Back then, you were pampered and spoiled.

And now you're venerated and fussed over, that's all.

"You're a puppet on a string, exactly like you were before–unlike a certain other woman I know."

"…?"

Nadeko Sengoku frowned at my words for the first time. Or–maybe it was a pained smile. Just as she was immature from my perspective, I was probably a stupid pain in the neck from hers.

But I went on anyway. I went on.

"She refused the salvation offered by a god–she rejected the chance for things to be easy, the chance to be happy. I'd figured she was better off since a god had granted her wish. For the life of me I couldn't see why she'd try to cure her ailment. In fact, I knew that things would be tougher for her if it was cured."

"…"

"Nevertheless–she chose a life without that god for a crutch. She wished for it. She repudiated anything that might comfort her–happenstance, accidents, blaming someone or something. She even resents me for everything that I did for her benefit. Totally different than you, huh?"

No way they could be compatible.

She'd come out and say that she hated Nadeko Sengoku–who in turn would want to kill her.

Romantic rivalry aside, Nadeko Sengoku would hate Hitagi Senjogahara.

Enough to want to kill her.

"You're probably right. We must be totally different, though I have no idea who you're talking about, or why. Still, sometimes,"

Nadeko Sengoku said, “it can be someone’s fault–whether you call it an accident or a twist of fate, in my case it’s absolutely Ogi’s fault.”

“Ogi?”

Ogi? What–or who was that? Was it someone’s name?

In fact, there was something I didn’t understand. Nadeko Sengoku had become a god to escape from the corner she’d been painted into, more or less–but how had she known where to find the “god seed” that Gaen-senpai had entrusted to Araragi? I’d assumed she’d come upon it by chance and hadn’t prior knowledge of it, but what she just said…

Could someone have given her a little push in the right direction?

Did someone–set Nadeko Sengoku up to become a god?

Indeed, she’d said, *You, too, Mister Kaiki? You’d trick ‘me.’*

You, too.

So, at some point, someone else tried to deceive Nadeko Sengoku–Araragi or Senjogahara seemed like obvious possibilities, but their behavior couldn’t be described as deception.

None of the others tried to dupe Nadeko Sengoku, either–they simply tried to dote on her.

So who?

Who deceived Nadeko Sengoku?

Who set her up as a god instead of doting on her–this Ogi?

Ogi?

“…gk.”

I felt as though I’d gotten my hands on an important clue, some vital intel that I ought to pass on to someone, to Gaen-senpai maybe, but I didn’t get a chance to think any more about it.

I was out of time.

I couldn't even stay on my knees any longer, and fell flat on my face. The weight of the snakes was too much for me to keep any part of my body upright.

I sank down among them, and it was all I could do just to continue drawing breath.

"Well…it's fine, though."

"…"

"Or maybe it isn't fine. It's only natural he'd try and resist, but Big Brother Koyomi shouldn't have tried to trick me like this. He shouldn't have lied to me."

"Araragi's got nothing to do with it," I squeezed out, in agony from the snakes pressing down on me. It was a highly honest statement, but hardly sincere, since his salvation was unmistakably part of the plan even if he hadn't been the one who put me up to it.

It didn't seem to warrant discussion, as far as Nadeko Sengoku was concerned, because she went ahead and declared, "It calls for a penalty. Promises have to be kept, so I'll wait until graduation. But I'll kill a few more. As punishment, I'll kill a few more. I'll slaughter five more people connected to Big Brother Koyomi. Right before his eyes."

"…"

Five more?

I guess that was a hell of a lot better than destroying the entire town as Gaen-senpai feared.

I'd failed, but we'd get by without suffering worse–I consoled myself with this fact. I was relieved. Even six feet under I wouldn't be able to stand an "I told you so" from Gaen-senpai or Ononoki who'd been kind enough to warn me.

Five more, though.

Apart from myself, presumably about to meet my end then and there, who would be the victims?–

“Yeah, Tsukihi and Karen are shoo-ins. Tsukihi’s my friend, but what can you do? It’s her big brother’s fault. Then Miss Hanekawa…and though I’ve never met her, that girl Big Brother Koyomi’s always calling his best friend, Mayoi Hachikuji? And I don’t want to, I really don’t, but maybe Miss Kanbaru.”

“…”

Hm.

That’d be more or less who.

If it were six, Oshino would probably fill out the roster, and if it were four, Hachikuji might be pulled from the lineup–in other words, that was the extent of it, of Nadeko Sengoku’s association with Koyomi Araragi. She acted so stuck on him but actually didn’t know much about him.

No chance in hell that Araragi’s circle of friends, his connections, was limited to five people–basically, this middle school girl was just going around saying she loved Araragi without knowing a damn thing about him.

That’s all there was to her feelings, and that’s all there was to their relationship.

Sighing, I lay there on the bare earth–or on a carpet of snakes, and mused. About how the world would get off pretty lightly, how maybe it didn’t matter if I went down now.

In my heart of hearts, I didn’t want to beg for my life, it seemed, but respecting that sentiment for what it was, and meeting it on its own terms, I might be able to pull through by feigning death or unconsciousness.

While I might have tried to deceive Nadeko Sengoku, that was in a sense “a foregone conclusion” to her, something she’d known from the start, so–she wasn’t angry at me.

She remained smiling the entire time.

Her rage, and the penalty or whatever, were all directed elsewhere–at other people. At Koyomi Araragi and Hitagi Senjogahara.

In that case, saying *not my problem* and calling it quits was just my style, wasn’t it? I hadn’t been able to dupe Nadeko Sengoku, but I’d just play dead where I lay.

And I’d never, seriously never, set foot in the town again–five or seven or eight people would die, but afterwards the town was stabilized, spiritually speaking, and everyone lived in peace–

Happily ever after–what a phony *happily,* but so what, all tales are out and out lies, so let’s take it as it comes. As a comfort.

I hadn’t accomplished my task; my client Senjogahara would be killed; and Suruga Kanbaru would get dragged into it and die as well.

Each concerned me in its own way, but once some time passed and things calmed down and I started making money again, surely I’d forget about it.

I told myself this, but couldn’t fool myself anymore.

My credentials as a swindler had been called into question by my failure to deceive just one middle school girl, and I couldn’t even lie to myself anymore.

“Sengoku,” I called Nadeko Sengoku by her name for the first time. By her surname alone.

Addressing her not as a god, not as a serpent deity.

Not as a mark.

But as a middle school girl.

“You said you didn’t want to become a god, right?”

“Yeah, and?”

“That you didn’t become one because it was what you aspired to be.”

“I did say that. What about it?”

“Then, do you want to become a manga artist?”

Taking an unexpected tack, taking your interlocutor by surprise, or unawares, and thereby taking them at their most vulnerable, is a basic conversational technique–as practiced by fortune tellers and swindlers, it’s called a “cold reading.” Out of nowhere, you ask something like, “You’re not feeling well today, are you?” If the mark is feeling even slightly unwell (and there isn’t a person alive who can maintain perfect health all the time), they’ll think you’ve hit on the truth and their heart will skip a beat.

Even if the mark is feeling perfectly well, your totally off-base–and let’s be honest, totally ambiguous–question will still make their heart skip a beat. They’ll start wondering why you’d say something so off-base.

Not feeling well? Why would he say that when I’m feeling fine? Am I suffering from some malady that I’m not aware of?

That’s what they end up thinking–and when they do, they become distracted, which is the same as not thinking, and that creates a weakness to be exploited.

But anyone with even a modicum of psychological knowledge will be familiar with this most elementary of techniques, so if the swindler isn’t careful about who he uses it on, his true colors will be exposed for all to see.

What I pulled on Nadeko Sengoku–on Sengoku, though, was no cold reading.

I knew that it was the truth.

I'd had a glimpse behind the curtain.

As proof, Sengoku was neither "startled" by my words, nor did she "think" about them.

She shouted–
"A…urrr…ghaaa

“Aa, a, a, a, aa, aaaaaa, aaaaaaaaaaa, a, aa, aaa, aaaa, aaaa!”

When she finally reached me, her staccato scream of rage was accompanied by a punch to my face. Not a slap, not a chop; a tightly clenched fist.

It hurt, naturally.

But it was the haymaker of an off-balance middle school girl, so a slight turn of the head was all it took to kill its momentum.

Without regard for whether or not she had done any damage, however, Sengoku proceeded to punch me in the face again with her other fist.

She wasn’t in any kind of proper stance, it wasn’t even her dominant hand, nothing.

That sort of punch.

“H-How do you know that, how do you know that, how do you know that, how do you know that! Aaa, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

What with all the snakes smothering my body, inclining my head was just about the only form of resistance available to me, so it was pretty much an all-you-can-punch buffet.

I couldn’t dampen the full force of each punch, of course, and the damage accumulated bit by bit–but the same went for Sengoku.

When you punch people.

Your fists also get busted up.

In fact, Sengoku was probably taking more damage than I was.

She may have been a god, she may have attained divinity, wielding great power and commanding legions of snakes–but she was still a middle school girl, not exactly battle-hardened.

She was weak in hand-to-hand combat.

I'd had plenty of time, a full month, to carefully take her "measure" while we were engaged in cat's cradle, so I'm qualified to make that statement–then again, she did have a "mysterious ailment."

Her busted fists would likely heal up soon–but Sengoku was too enraged, too frenzied, too discombobulated to think about turning her power to healing.

If she'd used her snakes instead of hitting me directly–if she'd sent her poisonous snakes to assault me, she could've settled things in the blink of an eye, but it seemed she couldn't be satisfied unless she was striking me with her own two fists.

"Th-That means!" Sengoku screamed, shaking her blood-drenched fists.

Screamed until her face was crimson.

"Y-You saw them! You saw you saw you saw you saw you saw you saw you saw!"

"Yeah, I saw them."

It wasn't cold reading, but nor do I have ESP or any other sort of psychic power, so naturally, I wasn't saying that like I'd seen through her as Oshino might have.

Unlike his seeing through, there was a trick to how I penetrated her secret.

It wasn't that I saw through anything, I just plain saw.

"I saw them," I said, very conscious of the havoc my own teeth had wrought on the inside of my mouth. "I just put in ten yen, and open sesame."

Money.

Maybe it is everything after all–I laughed to myself.

In nihilistic resignation, and in all sincerity.

“A…aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! B-But I said to never ever open it–even Big Brother Koyomi was never supposed to see!”

“They’re pretty good, your drawings.”

Yes–that’s what was inside the sealed closet in Sengoku’s room. The contents of the closet, which had driven me to break and enter into their home, not that trespassing is a rarity for me, had been totally useless in “deceiving,” or in “perceiving,” Nadeko Sengoku.

Notebooks.

Not just one or two, but piles of them.

Well, every kid likes to draw some frames in a sketchbook or a lined notebook and pretend to be a manga artist.

Even me, embarrassingly enough.

Maybe kids who devote their youth to sports are different, but no kid who likes manga doesn’t play at being a manga artist. The initial investment is essentially nil; all you need is a notebook and pencil.

A mountain of such notebooks had been crammed into Sengoku’s closet–they were worthless, but that’s exactly why she didn’t want anyone to see them.

Someone seeing your creations.

For a pubescent child it was worse than someone reading your diary.

If you were still in elementary school, that would be one thing, but still actively doodling all that head-in-the-clouds stuff as a second-year middle schooler?

Someone seeing your daydreams–seeing your inner self?

It’s so shameful you want to die.

“But my god, the stories… What the hell is up with that nonsensical doe-eyed rom-com? Is this the fucking eighties? No such guy has ever existed, it’s ridiculous. Not to mention how smutty it gets.”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“And there was so much background and world-building, it was overwhelming. Don’t you think you’re overdoing it a little? If you tightened things up, I think it could have real mass appeal.”

“I-I’ll kill you! Kill you, kill you, kill you–you hear me, buddy, I’ll kill you and then kill myself!”

Sengoku’s face steamed with humiliation as she listened to me trampling all over her work, and she hit me again.

Well, well.

“Buddy,” eh?

Finally–treated as an equal.

By Nadeko Sengoku, she of the closed-off heart, who shuts out everyone and trusts no one.

“Killing me won’t help. I’ve got a habit of keeping notebooks as well, you see. There’s a fairly detailed record of everything that happened on a given day. So you can kill me, but when those notebooks come to light, your ‘creations’ will, too.”

This was not at all true.

My notebooks are encrypted to a certain degree and can’t be easily deciphered.

“Did you never even stop to think about it? Your parents are bound to open that closet if your whereabouts remain unknown, no matter how much they may dote on you. Do you really think that

when they do, they'll burn all the notebooks in there without even looking inside them?"

"…!"

She was struck dumb.

The fool really hadn't thought it through.

"But, well, if you quit this whole god thing, become human again, and go back to your room right now, you can probably take care of the whole thing, no problem. If you're that ashamed of–"

"Are you kidding me~~?! You think I'm going to give up being a god for such a stupid reason?!"

"Something like that, yeah."

My words might not have come out all that clearly since I was getting punched in the face as I spoke, but as long as the message got across.

"So, tell me, what *would* make you give up being a god?"

"…!"

"No matter who I talked to…Senjogahara, Hanekawa, even your parents, no one mentioned this little hobby of yours. No one said a word about it, because no one had any idea. There was no hint of it in any description of you, not anywhere. No foreshadowing, nary an intimation. There were plenty of people who knew that you were sweet on Araragi, but not a single person knew about the contents of your notebooks. Araragi had no idea, and neither did his sisters. That's how stubbornly you kept your shameful little creations secret." My face continued to be battered throughout this monologue. "You didn't tell a soul. Because it's your true dream."

Dream.

I hesitated slightly before letting that embarrassing little word roll off my tongue. The second someone like me utters that word, it starts to sound false.

But just because it sounds false.

Doesn't necessarily mean it is.

"Because our true wishes aren't something we tell other people–or even gods. Your beloved Fujio Fujiko didn't tell anyone but each other about their dreams of becoming manga artists." That last part was an out-and-out lie. I hadn't the faintest. It was a lie that sounded like a lie. For once I hated my tongue, lying even at a time like this. "You're probably happy as a god. You're probably having fun. Seems like it, anyway. I'm not out to drag you off your pedestal. But you didn't actually want to become a god, right?"

She'd said it was just happenstance.

That it was a twist of fate, a freak occurrence–like an accident, so even supposing someone intended for it to happen, that someone wasn't her.

"You must be happy now–but happy, having fun, and nothing more. Waiting around for six months, you've ended up with so much time on your hands that you went nuts for cat's cradle, okay? What are you going to do once you've killed Araragi and the others? Have nothing but time on your hands? I'll tell you right now, no one's going to come to this shrine–however happy you may be, you'll be nothing more than the steward presiding over its decay. An administrator tasked with keeping this town's peace. That's a raw deal. That's a job for the old. Is a middle school girl in the flower of her youth going to be satisfied with that? You going to start your twilight years before the sun has even come up?"

"…"

The words “raw deal” really seemed to hit home, and Sengoku fell silent.

She kicked me, silently.

“You didn’t want to be a god, you didn’t want to be happy. You wanted to be a manga artist, yes? Then–why not be one?”

Ending up in that guise.

Looking like that.

What the hell are you doing, Sengoku.

“Huff, huff, huff, huff, huff, huff…”

It seemed like her strength was finally giving out.

At long last, Sengoku stopped hitting me–but apparently she hadn’t calmed down at all, and she glared at me with bright-red, bloodshot eyes.

“Y-You moron. Those, are just doodles. They’re crappy and embarrassing, that’s why I didn’t want anyone to see them. My ‘dream’… You’re full of it,” she wheezed. “Those are trash–I wanted to throw them away, but throwing them away would be embarrassing too, so I just hid them in there, that’s all–”

“Don’t talk about your own creations that way, Sengoku,” I reproved her–there may have been some anger in my voice. “Creativity is embarrassing, and dreams are embarrassing too. That’s just the way it is. Nothing to be done about it. But at the very least, they’re not something you yourself ought to demean.”

“…”

“And they were really pretty good. I have to be honest, the plot and the setting and the characters didn’t do much for an old codger like me, but I know a thing or two about drawing. I mean, like I said, I

keep notebooks too, and I make drawings in mine as well…illustrations. And if nothing else, yours are better than mine."

I was flattering her, actually, out of self-interest. I was confident that I was the better artist. But that's precisely why I could say with confidence that Sengoku had some artistic skill of her own.

"You've got that little thing they call talent."

"You don't really mean that," she answered quickly. Too quickly. "Plus, it's not the kind of thing you can just decide to be."

"But it's also not something you'll ever be without trying–unlike being a god, or happy."

"…"

"And–as long as you're a god, you'll never make it."

You have to be human, I said. *You have to be human to make it.*

My logic was horrendous, if I do say so myself–I was pressing Sengoku to quit being a god because gods can't become manga artists.

What a thing for a grownup to be telling a kid.

While being crushed to death by snakes.

"As a god, you should have no problem killing Araragi and Senjogahara over this romantic snafu. I'm sure you could carry it off. But is that what you wanted to do? Is that who you wanted to be? It doesn't really matter to you, does it? That's why you told me all about it. You could speak openly because it's not important to you."

This was a disingenuous accusation. You could blab just as carelessly about something that's important to you–perhaps to spur yourself on.

In fact, when she was making eyes at Araragi, even if it wasn't overboard, she must have tried to "back herself into it" in such a way–and actually gotten backed into it.

That was her dream, after a fashion, and I couldn't deny her that.

But then that dream crumbled.

It turned into a dream that would never come true whether she was a human being or a god–but did her other dreams need to die along with it?

"Sengoku, I love money."

"…"

"Because money can stand in for anything. It can be the substitute for anything under the sun, it's a trump card. You can buy things, you can buy life, you can buy people, you can buy hearts, you can buy happiness, you can buy dreams–it's very precious, and yet not irreplaceable. That's why I love it." Come to think of it, I rarely spoke about money that way. The last time I did might've been back in middle school–when I was the same age as Sengoku. "Conversely, I do hate irreplaceable things. *I can't live without 'this,' I live only for 'that,' I was born for 'this'*–scarcity value really chaps my hide. Does getting turned down by Araragi really make you worthless? Was that your only goal? Was that all you wanted out of life? Listen, Sengoku."

When I paused, Sengoku kicked me. Maybe hearing Araragi's name used like that had enraged her further.

She seemed to have realized that kicking me wouldn't hurt her fists–and maybe that was a good sign.

At least, it meant that I'd brought her back down to earth. Enough for her to have that realization, anyway.

The proof was that she only kicked me once, no follow-up barrage.

“Listen, Sengoku,” I reprised. “A certain fool is taking care of the tiresome task of dating Araragi for you, so put him in the rear-view mirror and find your own tiresome task. You probably have all kinds of other things you want to try, things you want to do. Or you did, right?”

“Things I want to try–things I want to do.”

“Was it so painful that you’d just abandon everything? Really? Was there no high school whose uniform you wanted to wear? No monthly magazine whose new issue you wanted to read? No new season of a TV show or new movie that you were excited about? Sengoku, was everything other than Araragi just irrelevant bullshit to you? Didn’t you love your parents, those good, law-abiding citizens? Was everything other than Araragi just trash in your internal Top Ten?”

“…No.”

“Then why? Why does Araragi get such special treatment? Is he your avatar or something?”

“What would you know, Mister Kaiki.”

After taking a good long wind-up, focusing on her target like she was getting ready for a penalty kick, Sengoku kicked me in the face as I lay on the ground–turning my head a little bit wasn’t enough to mitigate the damage from an attack of that ferocity. Kicks like that could be the end of me.

“You don’t know a thing about me, Mister Kaiki.”

“I’ve done some poking around. But, you’re right. I don’t know anything. Nothing important, anyway. You’re the only one–who knows anything about you, which is why you’re the only one who can value you.”

And, I went on.

At this point, anything I said might be my famous last words.

A bunch of my teeth were broken. False teeth are really expensive… Shit.

“And you’re the only one who can make your dreams come true.”

“*That didn’t work so let’s try this instead?* You think that kind of half-assed approach is acceptable?”

For human beings? Sengoku asked.

My answer was somewhat garbled by the blood I spat out along with it.

“Of course it is. We’re only human, after all. Nothing is irreplaceable, nothing is immutable–for this girl I know, this girl I know intimately, her current love is always her first love. She acts as if she’s never really fallen for anyone before. And that’s the way it should be. Anything else would be no good–there’s no such thing as a one true love or an irreplaceable thing. Human beings, because they’re human beings, can always try again. They can always buy it again. So for now,” I turned my eyes towards the main hall of the shrine.

And that’s when I realized–that the hordes of snakes had disappeared. The snakes I was sure were atop my body, pressing me down, were gone. It was just that I was so grievously injured that I couldn’t move a muscle, couldn’t get up on my own.

I realized that I was at a perfectly normal shrine.

A brand-new building on lonely grounds.

The hordes of snakes had plowed clear the snow, however, and it felt like spring had arrived, just here.

I looked at the offertory box in front of the main hall.

“Go buy some real art supplies with the money I gave you. Three hundred thousand yen should be enough to get you one of everything.”

“I’m telling you, I’ve…never even thought about becoming a manga artist–not to mention, I’m a god now even if I never aspired to be one, and it just seems like a waste to ditch my good fortune.”

Hmm, I couldn’t argue with that.

It’s not like people have to become what they aspire to be.

“But–” Sengoku may have been about to kick me again at that point. She may even have been about to punch me again. Yet she did neither, she just kicked the air like she was over the whole thing and clenched her fists defiantly. “There was a manga artist that they called a god. It wouldn’t be a waste if I end up like him,” she said–dared to say.

Now, that was an impossible dream. But everyone has the right to dream as big as they want.

Every person has the right.

“Mm-hm. And I’m sure you can do it. If you don’t believe me, you’ll just have to try it and see for yourself.”

If you don’t believe me.

Coming from someone who made his living as a swindler, what turned out to be my last words to Sengoku were painfully cliché. Breathtakingly so.

But Sengoku replied:

“Okay. I’ll fall for it.”

And chuckled ruefully.

What kind of creep laughs when she knows she's being lied to?

Who cares. Hitagi Senjogahara had commissioned me to "deceive Nadeko Sengoku," and I had pulled it off, even if things had gone just a tiny bit differently than I had planned.

No.

Maybe I had failed.

Maybe I had failed miserably.

I extended my right arm, which felt like it had been fractured under the weight of the snakes, and with my index finger, I poked Sengoku in the forehead. "You little scamp."

"Sengoku–Kaiki?!"

Just at that moment, Koyomi Araragi appeared in his civvies. It was good timing. The best timing, perfect even.

If he'd come a little earlier, the hordes of snakes might have gone ahead and slain Araragi, while if he'd come any later, I wouldn't have known what to do with the collapsed and unconscious Sengoku. If I left her she might freeze to death. But I suspected some of my bones were broken, and in that state I wasn't at all confident that I could carry her down that snowy mountain path by myself.

So in that sense I was grateful for the arrival of the charming prince.

Nice of you to drop in.

But dropping in like that, in the middle of exam prep, with his secondary exams looming–had he had a premonition or something? Man, defenders of justice have excellent intuition.

Not that he'd ever been the kind of guy who'd put his exam prep before a middle school girl.

“Kaiki! What–the hell are you doing here?! What have you done to Sengoku?!” he shouted at me in utter consternation.

What to do? I was thoroughly exhausted, so I considered just laying it all out, telling him that thanks to Senjogahara’s request, I’d been in the throes of battle with Sengoku until a moment ago. If, as a result, things went sour between Senjogahara and Araragi and they broke up, what did I care, I thought–but instead, I lied effortlessly.

“Gaen-senpai asked me to come. I was exorcising this young lady. I’m here this time as a ghostbuster, not a swindler. I know it’s against the rules for me to be here at all, but you can give me a pass since I’m not here as a swindler, right?”

This brazen mouth of mine sure comes in handy.

Given that I was there as a swindler and nothing but, same way I live my life.

Excepting the last five minutes or so.

“Ms. Gaen…”

Hearing that didn’t seem to quell his confusion, but at least the situation started to make some kind of sense to him.

From my perspective it was an unthinkable prospect, any way you sliced it, but the explanation “Izuko Gaen is acting to put the situation to rights” seemed to be relatively convincing for Araragi.

Damn Gaen-senpai, and Oshino.

Always pretending to be righteous in front of these children.

Something I will absolutely never do.

“B-But…” Araragi cast his gaze down to my feet, where the unconscious Sengoku lay, and repeated, “What the hell have you done to Sengoku?”

It seemed he was letting the fact that I'd broken my promise slide for the moment and accepting the explanation that Gaen-senpai was behind my presence. I'd broken my promise before as far as he knew, so maybe he felt like that ship had already sailed.

"The same thing I did to your sister," I said bluntly.

"The same thing you did, to Karen…"

"Yes. Though this time it's not a bee. A killer bee was appropriate for your sister, but for Sengoku–for Nadeko Sengoku," I corrected, having inadvertently used the more familiar mode of address, "it's a slug."

"…"

"In a three-way deadlock between a slug, a frog, and a snake, the slug beats the snake–hence Slug Tofu. Then again, given that it's a fake aberration I cooked up, as is my style, it doesn't have the power to seal away a serpent god on its own. If Nadeko Sengoku hadn't been inclined to accept the slimy little guy, it never could have contended with the snake."

"Been inclined, to accept… Kaiki. What–"

Have you done to Sengoku, Araragi started to say, but apparently he thought better of it. Maybe he realized that he was beating that particular question into the ground.

And in its place, he asked, "–did you say to her?"

"The usual," I answered, ignoring Araragi and leaning over Sengoku. The job was nearly complete, and I didn't want any kid interfering at this point. "I said the usual. Love isn't everything, there are other things to look forward to in life, don't throw away your future, everyone's youth is embarrassing, someday you'll look back on this and laugh… All the usual stuff that adults say to children. What have I *done* to Sengoku? Just the usual."

So saying, I stuck my hand into her mouth, and gritting my teeth, thrust it in all the way to the elbow, so deep that I was a little worried her jaw might come off.

“H-Hey! Kaiki! What’re you doing!”

“Shut up already. Stay out of it, Araragi. Know that there’s nothing you can do for her.”

I started feeling around inside Sengoku’s body, and once my fingers held the “thing” I was searching for, I quickly pulled my arm free–and her little mouth closed back up normally.

And simultaneously.

Sengoku’s stark white hair, that full head of white-snake hair, turned jet black, which is to say, went back to normal.

From the aspect of an exalted serpent deity.

To that of a run-of-the-mill middle school girl–now that her hair wasn’t made of snakes anymore, I got the strong sense that, unlike in the pictures I’d seen in the album, her bangs were awfully short…too short, but maybe that was just my imagination?

And the white dress that oddly resembled a sacred vestment also turned back into a commonplace middle school uniform.

Three months ago.

That must have been what she looked like right before she became a god. She was back to her old self.

Sengoku was back.

Araragi must have recognized this too–and it seemed to reassure him. I displayed the talisman that was clutched in the hand I’d thrust down Sengoku’s throat.

The talisman of a snake.

The talisman of the corpse of an autophagous serpent.

It was dripping with saliva, or gastric juices, with bodily fluids anyway, almost like a slug had been crawling all over it, but either way, this was without a doubt the talisman that had bestowed divinity on Sengoku.

Might as well make sure, though.

“Is this the talisman Gaen-senpai entrusted to you?”

“Uh… Y-Yeah, it is…”

“I see,” I said, wondering what to do with it. My honest feeling was that it would fetch a hefty price, and I didn’t think Sengoku or Araragi could blame me if I just pocketed it…

But the thing had come from Gaen-senpai.

Better to let sleeping gods lie.

Or–a snake in the grass is worth leaving in the goddamn bush.

“Here,” I pushed the talisman on Araragi, acting for all the world like I was doing him a favor. Then I wiped my slimy hand on his shirt. “This time, don’t mistake who to use it on.”

“I’m not gonna,” Araragi declared. “I’m not using this thing.”

The same determination that started the whole mess–this guy never learned his lesson, not like it was for me to say.

Shrugging my shoulders, I walked past him, striding brazenly down the center of the path.

When I was about to pass under the torii.

“H-Hey, wait a sec, Kaiki! Where do think you’re going!”

“Nowhere, to do nothing… I’m not even supposed to be in this town. If she finds out I was here, Senjogahara will kill me.”

It wasn’t that I wanted to cover for her.

I was just using her as a clever excuse to make my exit.

“I’ve done my job. And made good money.” I walked off without looking back. “Get that kid home safe, Araragi.”

I made it sound cool, but basically I was just sticking him with the extremely dicey job of accompanying a missing girl on her return home.

Well, I couldn’t deny a prominent role to a guy who’d showed up conveniently at the eleventh hour.

“But be sure the girl never finds out it was you who brought her home.”

“Wha…”

“If she thinks you’re the one who saved her, you’ll be right back where you started. After all my hard work exorcising the spirit that possessed her…”

Though that was just happenstance.

“The Slug Tofu will leave of its own accord after three days, no lingering issues. If it absolutely won’t leave, throw some salt on her. And then never interact with that girl again for the rest of your life. Got it? Become nothing but a memory to her.”

“You really think I could be that irresponsible? It’s my fault that this happened to Sengoku, so it’s my responsibility to–”

“Do you really not get it?”

Ridiculous.

Why was I stuck doing all this preachy crap–I’m even less suited to it than Gaen-senpai or Oshino.

But it had to be said.

I had to say it.

“You cannot do a damn thing for that girl. With you around, that girl is just going to go to shit. Sometimes love makes people stronger, and sometimes it makes them go to shit–thanks to you, Senjogahara has gotten a little stronger. But with you around, Nadeko Sengoku will just go to shit.”

“…”

I wonder what Araragi’s expression was at that moment.

How did it feel, getting an earful from a guy like me? I imagined that, yeah, he might kill himself over it. Although I’d managed to conceal the fact that Senjogahara had instigated the whole thing, there was no hiding anymore that I’d rectified Araragi’s blunder. He probably even felt embarrassed.

Well, when was youth ever not embarrassing?

But I’d give him a little follow-up, on the house.

“Senjogahara went to shit because of me. And you made her stronger. This time around I happened to be the right man for the job, or maybe I was paying back that debt.”

“Kaiki–”

But Araragi didn’t finish his sentence. That was the extent of his protest.

I doubt he was convinced, but he had the good sense to leave well enough alone.

Then, as if in place, he asked, “You think that if I’m not around, Sengoku can be happy?”

“I wonder. She seemed happy until just now, but…being happy isn’t the point of life. Even if you can’t be happy, you can, say, become what you aspire to be,” I answered off-hand. “But either way,” I continued off-hand, “life’s got its bright spots, don’cha think?”

"…"

"See you around."

The more I said that we'd never meet again or that I'd never set foot in this town again, the more I seemed to get drawn back here. I decided to be contrary and tried that instead, then passed under the torii and down the steps.

My entire body was groaning with pain, but of course I didn't let on.

I don't know anything about any epilogue to this story, nor do I have a clue how things shook out. Why should I? Nothing to do with me.

I left Sengoku and Araragi behind and descended the mountain, then called Senjogahara. I told her straight out (with a few embellishments) that the job had gone off without a hitch, but that Araragi had found out about it.

The first part aside, she was pissed about the second part. It wasn't a charming kind of pissed like "blowing her top," she was so agitated that she went into hysterics.

I felt bad, but refreshed at the same time, like it served her right, so it was really very emotionally complicated for me.

But then again, this was the last time I would hear her voice, a parting auditory glimpse, so perhaps I felt more refreshed than anything.

"Well, I did the minimum to cover it up, now the rest is up to you. Old soldiers simply fade away, and the children inherit the Earth."

"You screwed up royally, so spare me the meaningless posturing…"

I don't know if there's such a thing as hysteria fatigue, but having thoroughly exhausted herself through her wild ravings, "Thank you.

You saved us," Senjogahara finally said for the record. She'd become a lot less difficult even just over the last month. "So I guess this is it."

"Guess so. Now we're done with each other. The end."

"Bye-bye."

"Okay then."

Neither of us spoke with any real feeling. There wasn't even the awkwardness you feel when you pass an old acquaintance on the street. There was absolutely nothing between us.

Well, I say "us," but maybe it wasn't as true for Senjogahara as it was for me, because she wasn't done.

"Hey, Kaiki. Can I ask you one thing?"

Well, well, no good at goodbyes. Still a child after all.

"No."

"Back then, two years ago, do you really think I was in love with you?"

"…"

How the fuck should I know? I thought, and considered hanging up, but as always, my mouth had other ideas.

"I did, yeah."

"I see," came her rejoinder, "someone got duped. By me."

"Right… What of it?"

"Nothing… That's it. Just watch out for wicked women from now on."

"I will. And you–don't forget to sign your letters."

I hung up, feeling like I'd gotten the last laugh. I was shocked at my own pettiness.

There was nothing to it. Figuring out that Hitagi Senjogahara was the one who'd put the letter in my hotel room was nothing to write home about–it would have been one thing if I'd realized immediately, but it had taken ages.

When I summoned her to the shopping district, it gave her an idea where I was staying. All that was left was for her to call and tell the concierge in an adorable, childish voice, "I have something for a guest of yours, a Mister Kaiki," like it was the most natural thing in the world–there were any number of hotels in the area, including the one where Hanekawa was staying, and no harm done if I wasn't there. I would never find out, at any rate.

And the show she put on of deducing how the letter had been slipped into the room must have been intended to eliminate her from the list of possible suspects.

No wonder she was pissed when I told her I'd torn up the letter; she'd written it.

So why did she give me the contradictory order to "withdraw," when she had commissioned me for the job?

Because she knew me all too well.

Hitagi Senjogahara knew perfectly well that if someone told me to withdraw, I'd become more stubborn about finishing the job–in fact, if Ononoki had taken the opposite approach, if Gaen-senpai's warning had been "not to withdraw," I might have then and there.

Which is why Senjogahara contacted me to do something, and the opposite as well.

A stupid, childish ploy.

Not that I hadn't gone along for the ride even as I'd known.

I turned off my cell phone, then immediately smashed it–okay, the phone itself was pretty pricey, so it was just the SIM card that I smashed.

And thus the cord tying me to Senjogahara was cut. She could probably find out my new number if she tried, of course, she'd done it before, but from here on out there'd be no reason for her to contact me. None at all.

I deleted Senjogahara's number, and only hers, from the empty cell phone, then headed to the station. I had to retrieve the suitcase I'd left in a coin locker there.

That was evidence–not quite Sengoku's closet, but it had to be properly disposed of.

"Be that as it may…"

As I trudged along the snowy February street, I wondered–forget Senjogahara, how much of this was actually premeditated by Gaen-senpai?

Because Senjogahara wasn't the only one who knew me well enough to know that if I were told to withdraw, I would do the opposite. Was the three million yen actually just an attempt to fund my endeavor?

Had I been dancing to Gaen-senpai's tune all along? Well, nothing to be gained by pondering such things. Dancing to her tune was a small price to pay to be free of my ties to her.

But had she really disowned me?

She might appear before me the very next day, as if nothing had happened… But I'd cross that bridge when I came to it. If she brought an offer of money to be made, I wouldn't refuse to play my old role as her junior.

Nevertheless, I thought.

Gaen-senpai's unsentimental and practical attitude was one thing–and Kagenui's lack of involvement was only to be expected, but where the hell was Oshino in all this?

He was every inch the vagabond.

A rootless vagabond like me, though even more dissolute, which made getting a grasp on his whereabouts harder than grasping a cloud–and yet.

That chump who loved to look cool in front of kids–did he really skip out when so many of his former charges had their backs against the wall? Did he really leave them hanging like that?

With Araragi and Senjogahara and the former Kissshot and Hanekawa and–a bunch of other people in such dire straits, wouldn't he come riding in on his white horse, like never before?

I'd gotten dragged into the mess because he hadn't shown up–but by all rights, saving Sengoku, saving Araragi and the others, should have been Mèmè Oshino's job, not mine.

Where was he now, and what the hell was he doing?

It bugged me.

Well, it didn't, but looking into it might prove profitable–maybe I should search for my fellow vagabond. It had been a long time since we'd had a drink together, and it was an appealing prospect.

Just as I came to that decision, I saw stars.

I toppled forward onto the snowy road, clueless as to why. I was quivering like jelly. Did my body finally reach its physical limit after being crushed by the snakes? But the snow before my eyes was dyed crimson, and I gathered that I'd been struck hard on the back of the head.

I could hear ragged breathing coming from behind me. "Huff, huff, huff, huff–"

Forcing myself to turn my bloodstained head, I beheld a lone middle-school-age kid standing there holding an iron pipe. The pipe was also stained with blood, so apparently that's what I'd been struck with. It was a terribly long pipe, and the centrifugal force must have been something.

"M-Miss Ogi was right. You really came back, you con man…" muttered the middle schooler, staring at me with eyes devoid of even a glimmer of sanity. "Th-Thanks to you, thanks to you, thanks to you–"

"…"

At first I didn't recognize the kid, but as I gazed at that face and those bloodshot eyes, it came to me. I couldn't recall a name, but… Right, it was one of the many middle schoolers I'd hoodwinked last time I was in town. One of the faces I'd drawn in my notebook on the plane ride from Okinawa.

And behind the kid there loomed a snake.

Not strictly behind, more like–around. A giant snake, coiled around, enwrapping, the kid's body.

It wasn't some vague phantom, but clearly visible.

What the hell?

Did the kid get counter-cursed or something?

Was this kid–the one who'd started everything by putting that "charm" on Sengoku?

And by the way… After solving the mystery of the letter, I'd lumped it in as Senjogahara's doing–but the identity of my "tail" was, strictly speaking, still unknown.

If it wasn't Senjogahara, then I assumed it was Gaen-senpai's watchdog… Yet if everything was proceeding according to plan for her, why would she put me under surveillance?

So had this kid been the one tailing me?

No, I turned it over in my blood-soaked head and judged that it must've been someone else. This kid didn't possess the requisite "sanity" to tail someone–

Wait, had I heard a name a second ago?

Ogi?

Who–is that?

The name rang a bell, like I'd heard it somewhere before, but that was as far as I got.

"Waaaa

Afterword

I think this marks something like my fiftieth novel, and it strikes me that the number of "liars" appearing in those books is proportionally very high. The real question is, how many "honest people" have I actually written about? I imagine this imbalance reflects the author's firm, utterly unshakable worldview that "all tales are lies!" And if the package is a "lie," won't everyone inside it inevitably be a "liar" as well? But that begs the question of the world outside the tale, the reality we all inhabit. It's not exactly overflowing with "veracity," is it? Even if people don't mean to "lie," aren't aware of "lying," they still "lie" "unwillingly" all too often. And conversely, sometimes people refuse to accept the "truth" as "true," interpreting it instead as a "lie" and ending up believing in its "falsehood"… Even though someone relates something "true," the listener takes it as "false" and so the "truth" spreads as a "lie," coming to exist as such. In that case, doesn't the "truth" become directly equivalent to a "lie," without any need to turn it inside out or upside down? Here I am spilling all this ink, but actually, maybe it's just that the author is a liar so all his characters are too, end of story. Then again, would a book featuring just honest people even be interesting?

And so this has been a book featuring just liars. During the writing process, I myself got thoroughly mixed up about what was true and what was false, what was honest and what was not. In any event, this is the final volume of the Monogatari Series Second Season. We had narrators switching places, innovatively for me, and as an author I was filled with trepidation when different viewpoints cast the same people and events in an entirely different light: *Hey, buddy, this is totally different from what you wrote before!* It's surprises like these that keep me writing novels. At any rate, this

book completes the publication of every installment of the Monogatari Series announced thus far. The schedule was insane, but I was able to pull it off thanks to assistance from many quarters. I'll never make such incautious promises in the future again, beware. Oops, *I swear.* There we go, a novel written one hundred percent in bad taste, this was *KOIMONOGATARI* "Chapter Romance: Hitagi End."

Senjogahara once again graces the cover of this book, which as it turns out marks a triumphant return five years in the making. Crazy, right? VOFAN has been kind enough to depict Senjogahara amid the snow for us.* I've caused all kinds of trouble schedule-wise for the editors at Kodansha BOX, but this is the last time, so please find it in your hearts to forgive me. And I want to offer my deepest gratitude to all the readers who have accompanied me on the fly-by-night journey through this Second Season.

Thank you so much.

There's a preview of the Final Season after the colophon,† so stick around for that.

* This, as well as the time frame, is in reference to the original edition's cover art, which has been included as a color insert.

† The copyright page is inserted at the end in Japanese books. The ads that follow in this edition are not for the Final Season, but rest assured that the series will continue to appear in translation.

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KOIMONOGATARI

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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